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THE
HEIR OF KINGSLAND COURT ;
OR,
THE BARONET'S BRIDE.

By MRS. MAY AGNES FLEMING,

Author of "The Star of De Vere," "Wed, Yet No Wife," "A Wonderful Woman," "Norine," &c.

LONDON: JAMES HENDERSON,
RED LION HOUSE, RED LION COURT, FLEET STREET, E.C.

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THE HEIR OF KINGSLAND COURT.

CHAPTER I.

THE BARONET'S HEIR.

"And there is danger of death—for mother and child?"

"Well, no, Sir Jasper—no, sir, no certain danger, you know; but in these protracted cases"—Dr. Parker Godroy paused, and coughed behind his hand—"it can do no harm, Sir Jasper, for the clergyman to be here. He may not be needed—let us hope he will not be—but your good lady is very weak—very weak, I am sorry to say, Sir Jasper."

"I will send for the clergyman," Sir Jasper Kingsland said, not looking at the grave little London doctor. "Do your best, as I know you will, Dr. Godroy, and for heaven's sake let me know the worst or best as soon as may be. This torture of suspense is horrible."

His voice was sharp and harsh with inward pain. Dr. Parker Godroy looked sympathetically at him through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"I will do my best, Sir Jasper," he said, gravely. "The result is in the hands of the Great Dispenser of life and death. Send for the clergyman, and wait and hope."

He quitted the library as he spoke. Sir Jasper Kingsland seized the bell and rang a shrill peal.

"Ride to the village—ride for your life!" the baronet said, imperatively, to the servant who answered; "and fetch the Rev. Cyrus Green here at once."

The man bowed and departed, and Sir Jasper Kingsland, of Kingsland Court, was alone. Alone in the gloomy grandeur of the vast library—alone with his thoughts and the wailing midnight storm.

For it was midnight. A clock high up in an ancient turret pealed noisily forth the weird hour, when "churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead," and an army of rooks, disturbed in their "beauty sleep" by the discordant noise, cawed harshly in reply. A little toy timepiece, of buhl, on the stone mantel-piece, chimed musically its story of the hour, and Sir Jasper lifted his gloomy eyes for a moment at the sound. He was leaning against

the old, quaintly-carved chimney-piece, looking at the smouldering fire, his dark face full of unutterable trouble and pain. A tall, spare, middle-aged man, handsome once—handsome still, some people said, with iron-grey hair and a proud, patrician face.

"Twelve," his dry lips whispered to themselves—"midnight, and for three hours I have endured this maddening agony of suspense! Another day is given to the world, and before its close all I love best may be cold and stark in death! Oh, Heaven, have mercy and spare!"

He lifted his clasped hands in passionate appeal. There was a picture opposite—a gem of Raffaello's—the Man of Sorrows, fainting under the weight of the cross, and the rays from the fire playing upon it seemed to light the pallid features with a derisive smile.

"The mercy you showed to others, the same shall be shown to you! Tiger heart, *you* were merciless in the days gone by! Let your black, bad heart break, as you have broken others!"

No voice had sounded, yet he was answered. *Conscience* had spoken in trumpet-tones, and with a hollow groan the baronet turned away and began pacing up and down.

It was a large and spacious apartment, this library of Kingsland Court, dimly lighted now by the flickering wood fire and the mellow glow of a branch of wax lights. Huge book-cases, filled to overflow, lined the four walls, and pictures precious as their weight in rubies looked dusily down from their heavy frames. Busts and bronzes stood in brackets and surmounted doors; a thick, rich carpet of moss green, sprinkled with oak leaves and acorns, muffled the tread; voluminous draperies of dark green shrouded the tall, narrow windows. The massive chairs and tables, fifty years old at least, were spindle-legged and rich in carving, upholstered in green velvet and quaintly embroidered by hands mouldered to dust long ago. Everything was old and grand, and full of storied interest. And there, on the wall, was the crest of the house—the uplifted hand grasping a dagger—and the motto, in old Norman French, "Strike once, and strike well."

Sir Jasper Kingsland, the last of a long line

that traced their ancestry far back beyond the days of the baronet-making king, James the First, stood alone to-night, and took note of all these thing with a dreary sort of wonder that they could afford him no help and no comfort in his hour of supremest need.

It is a very fine thing to be a baronet—a Kingsland of Kingsland—with fifteen thousand a year, and the finest old house in the county: but if Death will stalk grimly over your threshold and snatch away the life you love more than your own, then even *that* glory is not omniscient. For this wintry midnight, whilst Sir Jasper Kingsland walks moodily up and down—up and down—Lady Kingsland in her chamber above, lies sick unto death.

An hour passed—the clock in the turret and the buhl toy on the stone mantelpiece toll solemnly one. The embers drop monotonously through the grate—a dog bays deeply somewhere in the quadrangle below—the wailing wind of coming morning sighs lamentably through the tossing copper-beeches, and the roar of the surf afar off comes ever and anon, like distant thunder. The house is silent as the tomb—so horribly silent that the cold drops start out on the face of the tortured man. Who knows? Death has been on the threshold of that upper chamber all night, waiting for his prey. This awful hush may be the pæan that proclaims he is Master!

A tap at the door. The baronet paused in his stride, and turned his bloodshot eyes that way. His very voice seemed to tremble as he said:

"Come in."

A servant entered—the same who had gone his errand.

"The Reverend Cyrus Green is here, sir. Shall I show him up?"

"Yes—no—I cannot see him. Show him into the drawing-room until he is needed."

"He will not be needed," said a voice at his elbow; and Dr. Godroy came briskly forward. "My dear Sir Jasper, allow me to congratulate you. All is well, thank Heaven, and—it is a son!"

Sir Jasper Kingsland sank into a seat—thrilling from head to foot—turning sick and faint in the sudden revulsion from despair to hope.

"Saved?" he said, in a gasping whisper. "Both?"

"Both, my dear Sir Jasper," the doctor responded, cordially. "Your good lady is very much prostrated—exhausted—but that was to be looked for, you know; and the baby—ah, the finest boy I have had the pleasure of presenting to an admiring world within ten years! Come and see them."

"May I?" the baronet cried, starting to his feet.

"Certainly, my dear Sir Jasper—most certainly. There is nothing in the world to hinder, only be a little cautious, you know. Our good lady mustn't be excited the least in life—she must be kept composed and quiet, and left to sleep; and you will just take one peep and go. We won't need the Reverend Cyrus *this* bout."

He led the way from the library, rubbing his hands as your brisk little physicians do, up a grand stairway where you might have driven a coach-and-four, and into a lofty and most magnificently furnished bed-chamber.

The sick lady lay in a bed in the centre of the room—a lofty, four-posted affair, carved and quaint, and old as the hills, and covered and draped with white. But whiter than the draperies—whiter than the winter snow—her face looked up from the pillows, awfully corpse-like in its deathly pallor. The eyes were closed—the small, bloodless hands lay loose on the counterpane. In her shroud and winding-sheet she would never look more ghastly than now.

"Quiet now—quiet," the doctor whispered, warningly. "Excite her, and I won't be answerable for the result."

Sir Jasper Kingsland replied with a rapid gesture, and walked forward to the bed. His own face was perfectly colourless, and his lips were twitching with intense suppressed feeling. He bent above the still form.

"Olivia," he said, "my darling—my darling!"

The heavy eyelids fluttered and lifted, and a pair of haggard, dark eyes gazed up at him. A wan smile parted those pallid lips.

"Dear Jasper, I knew you would come! Have you seen the baby? It is a boy."

"My own, I have thought only of you. My poor, pale wife, how awfully death-like you look!"

"But I am not going to die—Doctor Godroy says so"—smiling gently. "And now you must go, for I cannot talk. Only kiss me, and look at the baby first."

Her voice was the merest whisper. He pressed his lips passionately to the white face, and rose up. Nurse and baby sat in state by the fire, and a slender girl of fifteen years knelt beside them and gazed in a sort of rapture at the infant prodigy.

"Look, papa—look! The Loveliest little thing, and nurse says it's the picture of you."

The young girl—Miss Mildred Kingsland—and until to-night the baronet's only child, pulled away a profusion of flannel, and displayed triumphantly a little red, wrinkled face.

Not very lovely, certainly, but Sir Jasper Kingsland's eyes shone with pride and joy as he looked. For was it not a boy? Had he not at last, after weary waiting, the desire of his heart—a son to inherit the estate, and perpetuate the ancient name?

"It is so sweet, papa!" Miss Mildred whispered, her small, rather sickly face quite radiant; "and its eyes are the image of yours! He's asleep now, you know, and you can't see them. And look at the dear, darling little hands and fingers and feet, and the speck of a nose, and the dot of a mouth! Oh, papa, isn't it nice to have a baby in the house?"

"Very nice," said papa, relaxing into a smile. "A fine little fellow, nurse! There, cover him up again and let him sleep. We must take extra care of the heir of Kingsland Court. And Mildred, child, you should be in bed. One o'clock is no hour for little girls to be out of their nests."

"Oh, papa"—reproachfully—"as if I could sleep and not see the baby!"

"Well, you *have* seen it, and now run away to your room. Mamma and baby both want to sleep, and nurse doesn't need you, I am sure."

"That I don't," said nurse, "nor the doctor either. So run away, Miss Mildred, and go to sleep yourself. The baby will be here all safe for you in the morning."

The girl—flaxen-haired, pretty-featured, kissed the baby, kissed papa, and dutifully departed. Sir Jasper followed her out of the room and went into the library, with the face of a man who has just been reprieved from sudden death. As he re-entered the library, he paused and started a step back, gazing fixedly at one of the windows. The heavy curtain had been partially drawn back, and a white, spectral face was glued to the glass, staring in.

"Who have we here?" said the baronet to himself. "That face can belong to no one in the house."

He walked straight to the window—the face never moved. He could see the snow falling noiselessly, rapidly—the ground covered, the spectral face set in a winter frame of white flakes. A hand was raised and tapped on the glass. A voice outside spoke:

"For Heaven's sake, open and let me in, before I perish in this bitter storm."

Sir Jasper Kingsland opened the window, and flung it wide. A rush of bitter wind, a shower of snow whirled in his face.

"Enter, whoever you are," he said. "No one shall ask in vain at Kingsland this happy night."

He stepped back, and, all covered with snow, the midnight intruder entered and stood before him. And Sir Jasper Kingsland saw the strangest-looking creature he had ever beheld in the whole course of his life.

CHAPTER II.

ACHMET THE ASTROLOGER.

An old man, yet tall and upright, wearing a trailing cloak of dull black, long grey hair flowing over the shoulders, and tight to the scalp a skull cap of black velvet. A patriarchal beard, abundant and silver-white, streamed down his breast, and out of a dull, white face, seamed and wrinkled, looked a pair of eyes piercing and black.

Sir Jasper took a step backwards, and regarded this singular apparition in undisguised wonder. The old man folded his arms across his bosom, and made him a profound Oriental salam.

"The lord of Kingsland gazes in amaze at the uninvited midnight stranger. And yet I think Destiny has sent me hither."

"Who are you?" the baronet demanded. "What jugglery is this? Are you dressed for an Eastern dervish in a melodrama, and have you come here to play a practical joke? I am afraid I cannot appreciate the humour of the masquerade. Who are you?"—sternly.

The old man folded his arms again, and once more bent servilely low.

"Men call me Achmet the Astrologer."

"An astrologer! Humph! Your art, it seems, could not protect you from a January storm," retorted Sir Jasper, with a cynical sneer. "But come in—come in. Astrologer or demon, or whatever you are, you look too old a man to be abroad such a night, when we would not turn an enemy's dog from the house. The doors of Kingsland are never closed to the tired wayfarer, and of all nights in the year they should not be closed to-night."

"When an heir is born to an ancient name and a princely inheritance. You speak rightly, my lord of Kingsland!"

Sir Jasper was closing the window; but at the gently murmured words he faced sharply round.

"How say you? What do you know of the events of this night, Sir Astrologer?"

"Much, Sir Jasper Kingsland, and for the very reason you deride—because I am an astrologer. I read the stars, and I lift the veil of the future, and lo! I behold your life years before you have lived it!"

Sir Jasper Kingsland laughed a cynical, unbelieving laugh.

"You jeer at me, you scoff at my words,"

murmured the old man, in soft, steady tones, "and yet there was no one to tell me on my way here that a son and heir had been born to the house of Kingsland within the past hour."

He lifted his arm and pointed to the clock, his full, dark eyes fixed in a powerful gaze upon the baronet's changing face. There was majesty in his mien, a lofty grace in the gesture, a thrilling sweetness in his voice, that indescribably fascinated the listener.

"You deride the power I profess, yet every day you quote Shakespeare, and believe him when he says, 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.' But I am accustomed to derision, and it does not offend me. Let me *prove* my power, so that even the most resolute scepticism dare doubt no longer. Judge of my skill to read the future by my ability in reading the past. I have come here—I have taken a long journey to look into the future of your new-born son. Before I begin, let me look into the past of his father. Sir Jasper Kingsland, let me read your palm."

But Sir Jasper drew back, his pale, patrician face cold and set in proud surprise.

"You have taken a long journey to look into the future of my son! Pray, my good astrologer, what is my son to *you*?"

"That is my secret, Sir Jasper, and my secrets I keep. Come, hold forth your hand, and test my skill."

"Why should I? Even if you can bring before me my past life, of what use will it be, since I must know all better than you?"

"My power to read the past may prove my power to read the future."

"Nay, you may easily *know* the past, without magical skill. Many thanks, my venerable friend, but I will not put your necromancy to the test."

The astrologer folded his arms, and looked the haughty baronet straight in the eyes until he quailed.

"Is Sir Jasper Kingsland afraid?" he said, slowly. "Surely not, for verily he comes of a daring race. And yet it seems like it."

The baronet made a stride forward, with eyes that blazed up suddenly like flames.

"By Heaven, if a younger man had spoken those words, I would have hurled him by the throat from yonder window! Be careful of your words, old man, else even your hoary hairs may fail to save you."

Once more the astrologer bent servilely.

"I cry your mercy, my haughty lord of Kingsland. It shall be as you say. I will depart as I came. I will neither serve you nor your new-born son, since you refuse to be served. I will depart at once. I fear no

earthly storm. Good night, Sir Jasper Kingsland. Look to the heir of your house yourself. When 'angels unawares' visit you again, treat them better than you have treated me!"

With a gesture indescribably grand and kingly, the silver-haired old man turned to go, folding his long cloak about him. But the voice of the baronet called him back.

"Stay," he said. "You speak of serving my son. What danger threatens his infant life that you can avert?"

"I know of none. I have not cast the horoscope yet."

"Then you wish to do so?"

"With your good permission. I have taken a long and toilsome journey for that very purpose, Sir Jasper Kingsland."

"Then you shall," the baronet cried, yielding to a swift impulse—"you *shall* cast his horoscope. If it can avert no evil, it can at least cause none. But, first, there is no action without its ruling motive. What are me or mine to you, to make you take a long and toilsome journey on our account?"

The old man paused, drawn up to his fullest height, imposing as a new King Lear, his deep, dark eyes glowing with inward fire.

"I will tell you," he said, in a deep voice.

"Years ago, Sir Jasper, when you were a young man, you did an honour and a service to one I dearly love, that I have never forgotten, and never will forget. You have ceased to remember it, years ago, no doubt; but I never have, nor ever will until my dying day."

The baronet stared.

"A service! An honour! What could it have been? I recollect nothing of it."

"I expected as much. But my memory is a good one; it is stamped on my heart for ever. Great men like Sir Jasper Kingsland, grandees of the land, forget these little things rendered to the scum and offal; but the scum and offal cherish them eternally. I owe you a long debt, Sir Jasper, and I will pay it to the uttermost farthing."

His black eyes blazed, his low voice rose, his arm uplifted fiercely for an instant, in dire menace. Then, quick as lightning flashes, all was transformed. The eyes were bent upon the carpet, the arms folded, the voice sank, soft and servile.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "In my gratitude I forget myself. But you have my motive in coming here—the desire to repay you, to look into the future of your son—to see the evils that may threaten his youth and manhood, and to place you on your guard against them. 'Forewarned is forearmed,' you know. Do not doubt my power. In far-

off Oriental lands, under the golden stars of Syria, I learned the lore of the wise men of the East. I learned to read the stars as you Englishmen read your printed books. Believe and trust, and let me cast the horoscope of your son."

"First let me test your vaunted power. Show me my past, before you show me my son's future."

He held forth his hand with a cynical smile. The old man took it gravely.

"As you will. Past and future are alike to me—save that the past is easier to read. Ah, a palm seamed and crossed, and marked with troubled lines. Forty years have not gone and left no trace behind."

"Forty years!" interrupted Sir Jasper, with sneering emphasis. "Pray don't bungle in the very beginning."

"I bungle not!" answered Achmet, sternly. "Forty years ago, on the third of next month, you, Jasper Southdown Kingsland, were born beneath this very roof."

The baronet looked considerably surprised at this very minute statement.

"Right!" he said. "You know my age. But go on."

"Your boyhood you passed here—quiet, eventless years—with a commonplace mother and a dull, proud father. At ten your mother went to her grave. At twelve the late Sir Noel followed her. At thirteen you were a lonely orphan, removed from this house to London, in the charge of a guardian that you hated. Am I not right?"

"You are. Pray go on."

"At fourteen you went to Rugby. From that time until you attained your majority, your life passed in public schools and universities, harmlessly and monotonously enough. At twenty-one you left Cambridge, and started to make the grand tour. Your life, just then, gave the promise of bright and brilliant things. You were tolerably clever; you were young and handsome, and heir to a noble inheritance. Your life was to be the life of a great and good man—a benefactor of the human race. Your memory was to be a magnificent memento for a whole world to honour. Your dreams were wild and vague, and sublimely impracticable; and ended in—nothing!"

Sir Jasper Kingsland listened and stared, like a man in a dream, his scepticism fading away like mist before sunrise. Achmet the Astrologer continued to read the palm with a fixed, stony face.

"And now the lines are crossed, and the trouble begins. As usual, a woman is at the bottom of it. Sir Jasper Kingsland is in love!"

There was a pause. The baronet winced a little, and the astrologer bent lower over the palm.

"It is in Spain," he continued, in the dreamy, far-off tone of a man who sees a vision, "glowing, gorgeous Spain, and she is one of its loveliest children. The oranges and pomegranates scent the burning air; the vineyards glow in the tropic sun, and golden summer for ever reigns. But the glowing Southern sun is not more brilliant than the Spanish gipsy's flashing black eyes—nor the pomegranate blossoms half so ripe and red as her cheeks. Her step is light as the step of an antelope; her voice sweet as the harps of heaven. She is Zenith the Zingara, and you love her."

"In the fiend's name!" Sir Jasper Kingsland cried, snatching away his hand. "What jugglery is this?"

He was ashen white, and his steady voice shook. Calmly the astrologer repossessed himself of the baronet's hand.

"One moment more, my lord of Kingsland," he said, "and I have done. Let me see how your love dream ends. Ah, the old, old story! Surely I might have known. She is beautiful as the angels above, and as innocent—and she loves you with a mad abandon that is worst idolatry, as only women ever love. And you—you are grand and noble, a Mi-lor Inglese, and you take her love, her crazy worship, as a demi-god might, with uplifted grace, as your birthright—and she is your pretty toy of an hour, and then, careless and happy, you are gone. Sunny Spain, with its olives and its vineyards, its pomegranates and its Zenith the Gitana, is left far behind, and you are roaming, happy and free, through France. And lo, Zenith, the forsaken, lies prone on the ground, and tears out her hair by the handful, and goes stark mad for the day-god she has lost! There, Sir Jasper Kingsland—the record is a black one! I wish to read no more."

He flung the baronet's hand away, and once more his eyes glowed like the orbs of a demon. But Sir Jasper, pale as a dead man, saw it not.

"Are you man or devil?" he said, in an awe-struck tone. "No living mortal knows what you have told me this night."

Achmet the Astrologer smiled—a dire, dark smile. His eyes shone upon the speaker, full of deadliest menace.

"Man, in league with"—he pointed downwards—"the dark potentate you have named, if you like. Whatever I am, I have truthfully told you the past, as I will truthfully tell your son's future."

"By palmistry?"

"No, by the stars. And behold," cried the astrologer, drawing aside the curtain, "yonder they shine!"

Surely the storm had cleared away, leaving the world wrapped in a winding sheet of dead white, and up in heaven the silver stars swing, crystal-clear, sparkling bright.

"Take me to an upper room," the astrologer exclaimed, in an inspired tone, "and leave me. Destiny is propitious; the Fate that ruled your son's birth has set forth the shining stars for Achmet to read. Lead on!"

Like a man in a dreamy swoon, Sir Jasper Kingsland obeyed. He led the astrologer up the grand sweeping staircases—up and up, to the very top of the house—to the lofty, lonely battlements. Cloudless spread the wide night sky; countless and brilliant shone the stars; peaceful and majestic slept the purple sea; spotless white gleamed the snowy earth under the moon at its full. A weird, witching scene!

"Leave me," said the astrologer, "and watch and wait until the hour of four; then come to me."

He waved him away with a regal motion. He stood there gazing, rapt, at the stars, as a king looking upon his subjects. And the haughty baronet, without a word, turned and left him.

The endless hours wore on—two, three, and four. Sir Jasper mounted to the battlements, still like a man in a dazed dream.

Achmet the Astrologer turned slowly round. The pale, silvery moon blanched his ever-white face with the hue of death. In his hand he held a folded paper. He had been writing.

"Have you done?" the baronet asked.

"I am done. Your son's fate is here."

He touched the paper; he spoke in a voice of awful solemnity; his eyes had a wild, dilated look, from which Sir Jasper shrank—they looked so horribly like the eyes of a man who has been face to face with disembodied spirits.

"Is that for me?" he asked, shrinking palpably from it, even whilst he spoke.

"This is for you"—the astrologer handed him the paper as he spoke. "It is for you to read—to do with after as you see fit. I have but one word to say. Not I, but a mightier power traced the words you will read—your son's irrevocable fate. Don't hope to shirk it. Fate is fate—doom is doom. My task is ended, and I go. Farewell!"

"No, no," the baronet cried—"not so. Remain and breakfast here."

"No, Sir Jasper Kingsland, I ~~break~~ no bread under your roof. I have done my work, and depart for ever. Look to your son!"

He spoke the last words slowly, with a tigerish glare of hate leaping out of his eyes, with deadly menace in every syllable. Then he was gone, down the winding stairway, like a black ghost, and so out and away.

Sir Jasper Kingsland took the folded paper and sought his room. There in the pale day-dawn he tore it open. One side was covered with cabalistic characters, Eastern symbols, curious marks, and hieroglyphics. The other side was written in French, in long, clear, legible characters. There was a heading—"Heroscope of the Heir of Kingsland." Sir Jasper sat down eagerly and began to read.

Nearly an hour after, a servant, entering to replenish the faded fire, fled out of the room and startled the household with his shrieks. Two or three domestics rushed in. There lay Sir Jasper Kingsland prone on his face on the floor, stiff and stark as a dead man. A paper, unintelligible to all, was clutched tightly as a death grip in his hand. Reading that crumpled paper, the strong man had fallen there flat on the floor, in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER III.

THE HUT ON THE HEATH.

Far away from the lofty, battlemented, ancestral home of Sir Jasper Kingsland—miles away, where the ceaseless sea sparkled the long day through, as if sown with stars—where the foamy swells rolled in dull thunder up the white sands—straight to the seashore went Achmet the Astrologer. A long strip of bleak marsh-land, spreading down the hillside, and sloping to the sea, arid and dry, in the burning summer time, sloppy and sodden now—that was his destination. It was called Hunsden's Heath—a forlorn and desolate spot, dotted over with cottages of the most wretched kind, inhabited by the most miserable of the miserable poor. To one of these wretched hovels, standing nearest the sea, and far removed from the rest, Achmet swiftly made his way.

The sun was high in the heavens; the sea lay all aglitter beneath it. The astrologer had got over the ground at a swift, swinging stride, and he had walked five miles at least; but he paused now, with little sign of fatigue in his strange white face. Folding his arms over his breast, he surveyed the shining sky, the glittering sea, with a slow, dreamy smile.

"The sun shines and the sea sparkles on the natal day of the heir of Kingsland," he said to himself; "but for all that, it is a fatal day to him. The sins of the father shall be visited on the children even to the third and fourth generation, saith the Book Christians believe in. Christians!"—he laughed a harsh laugh.

"Sir Jasper Kingsland is a Christian! The religion that produces such men *must* be a glorious one! He was a Christian when he perjured himself and broke *her* heart! 'Tis well. As a Christian he cannot object to the vengeance Christianity teaches."

He turned away, approached the lonely hut, and tapped thrice—sharp, staccato knocks—at the door. The third one was answered, the door swung back, and a dark damsel looked out.

"Is it thee, Pietro?"

"It is I, Zara!"

He stepped in as he spoke, closed the door, took her face between his hands, and kissed both brown cheeks. The girl's dark face—a handsome face, with sombre, shining eyes and dark tresses—lit up into the splendour of absolute beauty as she returned his caress.

"And how is it with thee, my Zara?" the astrologer said, "and thy little one?"

"It is well. And thyself, Pietro?"

"Very well. And the mother?"

"Ah, the mother! Poor mother! She lies as you saw her last—as you will always see her in this lower world—dead in life! And he"—the girl Zara's eyes lit fiercely up—"didst see *him*, Pietro?"

"I have seen him, spoken to him, told him the past, and terrified him for the future. There is a son, Zara—a new-born son."

"Dog, and son of a dog!" Zara cried, furiously. "May curses light upon him in the hour of his birth, and upon all who bear his hated name! Say, Pietro, why didst thou not strangle the little viper as thou wouldst any other poisonous reptile?"

The man laughed softly.

"My Zara, I did not even see him. He lies cradled in rose-leaves, no doubt, and the singing of the west wind is not sweet enough for his lullaby. No profane eye must rest on this sacred treasure, fresh from the hands of the gods! Is he not the heir of Kingsland? But, sweet, I have read the stars for them. Achmet the Astrologer has cast his horoscope, and Achmet, and Zara, his wife, will see that the starry destiny is fulfilled. Shall we not?"

"If I only had him here," Zara cried, claving the air with her two hands, her black eyes blazing, "I would throttle the baby-snake, and fling him dead in his father's face! And that father! Oh, burning alive would be far too merciful for *him*!"

Achmet smiled and drew her long, black braids caressingly through his fingers.

"You know how to hate, and you will teach our little one. Yes, the fate I have foretold shall come to pass, and the son of Sir Jasper

will live to curse the day of his birth! And now I will remove my disguise, and wash and breakfast, for I feel the calls of hunger. Then I will see the mother."

"She has been waiting for your coming," Zara said. "She counts the moments when you are away."

She led the way into the room. There was but the one room and a loft above. The lower apartment of the hut on the heath was the very picture of abject poverty and dreary desolation. The earthen floor was broken and rough; the sunlight came sifting through the chinks in the broken walls. A smoky fire of wet driftwood sulked and smouldered, black and forbidding, under a pot on the crook. There was neither table nor chairs. A straw pallet with a wretched coverlet lay in one corner; a few broken stools were scattered about; a few articles of clothing hung on the wall. That was all.

"The little one sleeps," the man said casting a swift glance over at the pallet. "Our pretty baby, Zara. Ah, if Sir Jasper Kingsland loves his first-born son as we love our child, or half so well, we are almost avenged already."

"He had need to love it better than his first-born daughter!" Zara said, fiercely. "The lion loves its whelp, the tiger its cub; but *he*, less human than the brutes, casts off his offspring in the hour of its birth!"

"Meaning yourself, my Zara?" the man said, with his slow, soft smile. "What would you have, degraded daughter of a degraded mother—his toy of an hour? And there is another daughter—a fair-haired, insipid non-entity of a dozen years, no more like our beautiful one here than a farthing rushlight is like the stars of heaven!"

He drew down the tattered quilt, and gazed with shining eyes of love and admiration at the sleeping face of a child, a baby-girl of scarce two years; the cherub face rosy with sleep, smiling in her dreams; the long, silky black lashes sweeping the flushed cheek, the abundant, feathery, jet-black curls floating loosely about—an exquisite picture of blooming, healthful, beautiful childhood.

Zara came to where the man knelt, gazing with adoring face, her wide black eyes glistening.

"My beautiful one—my rosebud!" she murmured. "Pietro, the sun shines on nothing half so lovely in this lower world!"

The man glanced up with his lazy smile.

"And yet the black, bad blood of the Gitanas flows in her veins too. She is a Spanish gipsy, as her mother and grandmother before her. Nay, not her mother, since the blue

blood of all the Kingslands flows in *her* veins."

"Never!" cried Zara, her eyes ablaze. "If I thought one drop of that man's bitter blood throbbed in my heart, the first knife I met should let it forth! Look at me!" she wildly cried, tossing back her raven hair. "Look at me, Pietro!—Zara, your wife! Have I one look of him or his abhorred English race?"

"My Zara, no! You are Sir Jasper Kingsland's daughter, but there is no look of the great Sir Jasper in your gipsy face, nor in the face of our darling either. She is all our own!"

"I would strangle her in her cradle, dearly as I love her, else!" the woman said, her passionate face aflame. "Pietro, my blood is like liquid fire when I think of him and my mother's wrongs!"

"Wait, Zara—wait! The wheel will turn and our time come. And now for breakfast. Dost know, wife, Sir Jasper Kingsland asked me to break his bread and drink of his cup?"

"The villain—the traitor—the dastard! I only wonder the very air of his house did not stifle you! Haste, Pietro, and remove this disguise. Your morning meal is ready."

She whipped off the pot, removed the lid, and a savoury gush of steam filled the room. The man Pietro laughed.

"Our poached hare smells appetizing. Keep the choicest morsels for the mother, Zara, and tell her I will be with her presently. There! Achmet the Astrologer lies in a heap."

He had deftly taken off his flowing cloak, his long, silvery beard and hair, and flung them together in a corner, and now he stood in the centre of the room, a stalwart young fellow of thirty or thereabouts, with great Spanish eyes and profuse curling hair of inkly black.

"Let me but wash this white enamel off my face," he said, giving himself a shake, "and Pietro is himself again. Sir Jasper would hardly recognize Achmet, I fancy, if he saw him now."

He walked to a shelf on which was placed a wash-bowl and towel, and plunged his face and head into the cold water. Five minutes' vigorous splashing and rubbing, and he emerged, his pallid face brown as a berry, his black hair in a snarl of crisp curls.

"And now to satisfy the inner man," he said, walking over to the pot, and seizing a wooden spoon. "My tramp of last night and this morning has made me famously hungry, Zara."

"And the hare soup is good," said Zara. "Whilst you breakfast, Pietro, I will go to mother. Come up when you finish."

A steep stairway that was like a ladder led to the loft. Zara ascended this with agile fleetness, and the late astrologer was left alone at his very un-magician-like work of scraping the pot with a wooden spoon. Once or twice, as the fancy crossed him of the contrast between Achmet the Astrologer reading the stars, and Pietro the tramp scraping the bones of the stolen hare, he laughed grimly to himself.

"And the world is made up of just such contrasts," he thought, "and Pietro at his homely breakfast is more to be dreaded than Achmet casting the horoscope. Ah, Sir Jasper Kingsland, it is a very fine thing to be a baronet, with fifteen thousand a year, a noble ancestral seat, a wife you love, and a son you adore. And yet Pietro, the vagabond tramp—the sunburnt gipsy, with stolen hares to eat, and rags to wear, and a hut to lodge in—would not exchange places with you. We have sworn vendetta to you and all of your blood, and by"—he uplifted his arm and swore a fearful oath—"we will keep our vow!"

His swarthy face darkened with passionate vindictiveness as he arose, a devil gleaming in either fierce black eye.

"As man sows so shall he reap," he muttered, between his clenched teeth, setting his face towards Kingsland Court. "You, my lord of Kingsland, have sown the wind! You shall learn what it is to reap the whirlwind!"

"Pietro, Pietro!" crowed a little voice, gleefully. "Papa Pietro, take Sunbeam!"

The little sleeper in the bed had sat up, her bright, dark face sparkling, two little dimpled arms outstretched. The man turned, his vindictive face growing radiant.

"Papa Pietro's darling—his life—his angel! And how does the little Sunbeam?"

He caught her up, covering her cherub face with impassioned kisses.

"My love—my life—my darling! When Pietro is dead, and Zara is old and feeble, and Zenith dust and ashes, *you* will live, my radiant angel, my black-eyed beauty, to perpetuate the malediction. When his son is a man, you will be a woman, with all a woman's subtle power and more than a woman's beauty, and you will be his curse, and his bane, and his blight, as his father has been ours. Will you not, my little Sunbeam?"

"Yes, papa—yes, papa!" lisped the little one, patting his brown cheeks and kissing them lovingly. "Sunbeam is papa's own girl, and will do what papa says."

"Pietro!" called the voice of his wife above. "If you have done breakfast, come up. Mother is awake, and would see you."

"Coming, *carissima*!"

He kissed the baby girl, placed her on the pallet, and sprang lightly up the steep stair.

The loft was just a shade less wretched than the apartment below. There was a bed on the floor, more decently covered, two broken chairs, a table with some medicine bottles and cups, and a white curtain on the one poor window. By this window Zara stood, gazing out over the sunlit sea.

On the bed lay a woman, over whom Pietro bent reverently the moment he entered the room. It was the wreck of a woman who, in the days gone by, must have been gloriously beautiful; who was beautiful still, despite the ravages years, and sickness, and poverty, and despair had wrought.

The eyes that blazed, brilliant and black, were the eyes of Zara—the eyes of the baby Sunbeam below—and this woman was the mother of one, the grandmother of the other.

Pietro knelt by the pallet and tenderly kissed one transparent hand. The great black eyes turned upon him, wild and wide.

"Thou hast seen him, Pietro?" in a breathless sort of way. "Zara says so."

"I have seen him, my mother—I have spoken to him. I spent hours with Sir Jasper Kingsland last night."

"Thou didst?" Her words came pantingly, while passion throbbed in every line of her face.

"And there is a son—an heir?"

"There is."

She snatched her hand away and threw up her withered arms with a vindictive shriek.

"And I lie here, a helpless log, and he triumphs! I, Zenith, the Queen of the Tribe—I, once beautiful and powerful, happy and free! I lie here, a withered hulk, what he has made me! And a son and heir is born to him!"

As if the thought had goaded her to a frenzy of madness, she leaped up in bed, tossing her gaunt arms and shrieking madly:

"Take me to him—take me to him! Zara! Pietro! Take me to him, if ye are children of mine, that I may hurl my burning curse upon him and his son before I die! Take me to him, I say, or I will curse *ye*!"

She fell back, with an impotent scream, and the man Pietro caught her in his arms. Quivering and convulsed, foaming at the mouth, and black in the face, she writhed in an epileptic fit.

"She will kill herself yet," Pietro said.

"Hand me the drops, Zara."

Zara poured something out of a bottle into a cup, and Pietro held it to the sick woman's livid lips.

She choked and swallowed, and, as if by

magic, lay still in his arms. Very tenderly he laid her back on the bed.

"She will sleep now, Zara," he said. "Let us go."

They descended the stairs. Down below, the man laid his hands on his wife's shoulders, and looked solemnly into her face.

"Watch her, Zara," he said, "for she is mad, and the very first opportunity she will make her escape and seek out Sir Jasper Kingsland; and that is the very last thing I want. So watch your mother well."

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNINVITED GUEST.

Sir Jasper Kingsland stood moodily alone. He was in the library, standing by the window—that very window through which, one stormy night, scarcely a month before, he had admitted Achmet the Astrologer. He stood there with a face of such dark gloom, that all the brilliant brightness of the sunlit April day could not cast one enlivening gleam.

And yet the prospect on which he gazed might have made luminous the face of any common man, although not so blessed as to be its owner. Swelling meadows, all his own; velvety lawns, sloping away to sunlit terraces, where gaudy peacocks strutted; long, leafy arcades, through which the golden sunlight sifted in amber rain; waving trees and dark plantations. Over all, the cloudless April sky, and far beyond, the sparkling, sunny sea.

But not all the glory of earth and sky could lighten that settled cloud of blackest gloom on the wealthy baronet's face. He stood there scowling darkly upon it all, so lost in his own sombre thoughts that he did not hear the library door open, nor the soft rustle of a woman's dress as she halted on the threshold.

A fair and stately lady, with a proud, colourless face, lit up with pale blue eyes, and with bands of pale, flaxen hair pushed away under a dainty lace cap—a lady who looked scarce thirty, although almost ten years older, unmistakably handsome, unmistakably proud. It was Olivia, Lady Kingsland.

"Alone, Sir Jasper!" a musical voice said. "May I come in, or do you prefer solitude and your own thoughts?"

The sweet voice—soft and low, as lady's voice should be—broke the sombre spell that bound him. He wheeled round, his dark, moody face lighting up at sight of her, as all the glorious morning sunshine never could have lit it. That one radiant look would have told you how he loved his wife.

"You, Olivia?" he cried, advancing.

"Surely this is a surprise! My dearest, is it quite prudent in you to leave your room?"

He took the slender white-robed figure in his arms, and kissed her as tenderly as a bridegroom of a week might have done. Lady Kingsland laughed—a soft, tinkling little laugh.

"A month is quite long enough to be a prisoner, Jasper, even although a prisoner of state. And on my boy's christening fête—the son and heir I have desired so long—ah, surely a weaker mother than I might essay to quit her room."

The moody darkness swept over the baronet's face again at her words, like a palpable cloud.

"Is he dressed?" he asked.

"He is dressed and asleep, and Lady Helen and Mr. Carlyon, his godmother and godfather, are hovering over the crib like twin guardian angels. And Mildred sits *en grande tenue* on her chair, in a speechless trance of delight, and nurse rustles about in her new silk gown and white lace cap, with an air of importance and self-complacency almost indescribable. The domestic picture only wants papa and mamma to make it complete."

She laughed as she spoke, a little sarcastically; but Sir Jasper's attempt even to smile was a ghastly failure.

Lady Kingsland folded both her hands on his shoulder, and looked up in his face, with anxious, searching eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

The baronet laughed uneasily.

"What is what?"

"This gloom, this depression, this dark, mysterious moodiness. Jasper, what has changed you of late?"

"Mysterious moodiness—changed me of late! Nonsense, Olivia! I don't know what you mean."

Again he strove to laugh, and again it was a wretched failure.

Lady Kingsland's light-blue eyes never left her husband's face.

"I think you do, Jasper. Since the night of our boy's birth you have been another man. What is it?"

A spasm crossed the baronet's face; his lips twitched convulsively; his face slowly changed to a grey, ashen pallor.

"What is it?" the lady slowly reiterated. "Surely my husband, after all these years, has no secrets from me?"

The tender reproach of her tone, of her eyes, stung the husband, who loved her, to the quick.

"For Heaven's sake, Olivia, don't ask me," he cried, passionately. "It would be sheerest

nonsense in *your* eyes, I know. You would but laugh at what half drives me mad!"

"Jasper!"

"Don't look at me with that reproachful face, Olivia! It is true. You would look upon it as sheerest folly, I tell you, and laugh at me for a credulous fool."

"No," said Lady Kingsland, quietly, and a little coldly. "Know me better. I could never laugh at what gives my husband pain."

"Pain! I have lived in torment ever since, and yet—who knows?—it may be absurdest jugglery. But he told me the past so truly—my very thoughts. And no one could know what happened in Spain so many years ago. Oh, I *must* believe—I cannot help it—and that belief will drive me mad!"

The outburst was more to himself than to her. He forgot she was even there.

Lady Kingsland stood looking and listening in pale wonder.

"I don't understand a word of this," she said, slowly. "Will you tell me, Sir Jasper? Or am I to understand you have secrets your wife may not share?"

He turned to her, took both her hands, and gazed in her pale, patrician face with a look of passionate pain.

"My own dear wife," he said—"my best beloved—Heaven knows, if I have one secret from you, I keep it that I may save you sorrow. Not one cloud should ever darken the sunshine of *your* sky, if I had my way. You are right. I have a secret—a secret of horror, and dread, and dismay—a terrible secret that sears my brain and burns my heart! Olivia, my darling, its very horror prevents my telling it to you!"

"Does it concern our boy?" she asked, quickly.

"Yes"—with a sort of groan. "Now you can understand its full terror. It menaces the son I love more than life. I thought to keep it from you—I tried to appear unchanged; but it seems I have failed miserably."

"And you will not tell me what this secret is?"

"I dare not! I would not have you suffer as I suffer."

"A moment ago," said his wife, impatiently, "you said I would laugh at it and you. Your words are inconsistent, Sir Jasper."

"Spare me, Olivia! I scarce know what I say, and do not be angry."

She drew her hands coldly and haughtily away from his grasp. She was a thoroughly proud woman, and his secrecy stung her.

"I am not angry, Sir Jasper. Keep your

secret, if you will. I was foolish enough to fancy I had a right to know of any danger that menaces my baby, but it appears I was mistaken. In half an hour the carriages will start for the church. You will find us all in the nursery."

She was sweeping proudly away in silent anger, but the baronet strode after her and caught her arm.

"You will know this!" he said, huskily. "Olivia, Olivia, you are cruel to yourself and to me, but you shall hear—part, at least. I warn you, however, you will be no happier for knowing."

"Go on," she said, steadily.

He turned from her, walked to the window, and kept his back to her whilst he spoke.

"You have no faith in fortune-tellers, clairvoyants, astrologers, and the like—have you, Olivia?"

"Most certainly not."

"Then what I have to say will scarcely trouble you as it troubles me—for I believe; and the prediction of an astrologer has ruined my peace for the past month."

Lady Kingsland lifted her blonde eyebrows and laughed.

"Is that all? The mountain in labour has brought forth a mouse. My dear Sir Jasper, how can you be so simply credulous?"

"I knew you would laugh," said Sir Jasper, moodily. "I said so. But laugh if you can. I believe!"

"Was the prediction very terrible, then?" asked his wife with a smile. "Pray tell me all about it."

"It was terrible!" her husband replied, sternly. "The living horror it has cast over me might have told you that. Listen, Olivia! On that night of our baby boy's birth, after I left you and came here, I stood by this window and saw a spectral face gleaming through the glass. It was the face of a man—a belated wayfarer—who adjured me, in heaven's name, to let him in."

"Well," said Lady Kingsland, composedly, "you let him in, I suppose?"

"I let him in—a strange-looking object, Olivia, like no creature I ever saw before, with flowing beard and hair silver-white"—

"False, no doubt."

"He wore a long, disguising cloak and a skull cap," went on Sir Jasper, heedless of the interruption, "and his face was blanched to a dull dead white. He would have looked like a resuscitated corpse, only for a pair of burning black eyes."

Lady Kingsland shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Quite a startling apparition. Melodra-

matic in the extreme. And this singular being—what was he? Clairvoyant, astrologer—what?"

"Astrologer—an Eastern astrologer—Achmet by name."

"And who, probably, never was further than London in his lifetime! A well-got-up charlatan, no doubt."

"Charlatan he may have been; Englishman he was not. His face, his speech, convinced me of that. And, Olivia, charlatan or not, he told me my past life as truly as I knew it myself."

Lady Kingsland listened with a quiet smile.

"No doubt he has been talking to the good people of the village and to the servants in the house."

"Neither the people of the village nor the servants of the house know aught of what he told me. He lifted the veil of the past, and showed me what transpired twenty years ago."

"Twenty years ago!"

"Yes; when I was fresh from Cambridge, and making my first tour. Events that occurred in Spain—that no one under heaven save myself can know of—he told me. He revealed to me my very thoughts in that bygone time."

Lady Kingsland knit her solemn brows.

"That was strange."

"Olivia, it was astounding—incomprehensible! I should never have credited one word he said but for that. He told me the past as I know it myself. Events that transpired in a far foreign land a score of years ago, known, as I thought, to no creature under heaven, he told me of as if they had transpired yesterday. The very thoughts that I thought in that bygone time he revealed, as if my heart lay open before him. How, then, could I doubt? If he could lift the veil of the irrevocable past, why not be able to lift the veil of the mysterious future? He took the hour of our child's birth, and ascended to the battlements, and there, alone with the stars of heaven, he cast his horoscope. Olivia, men in all ages have believed in this supernatural power of astrology, and I believe as firmly as I believe in heaven."

Lady Kingsland listened, and that quiet smile of half amusement, half contempt, never left her lips.

"And the horoscope proved a *horror*scope, no doubt," she said, the smile deepening. "You paid your astrologer handsomely, I presume, Sir Jasper?"

"I gave him nothing. He would take nothing, not even a cup of water. Of his own free will he cast the horoscope, and without

reward of any kind went his way when he had done."

"What did you say the name was?"

"Achmet the Astrologer."

"Melodramatic again! And now, Sir Jasper, what awful fate betides our boy?"

She asked with that derisive smile on her face, and her husband turned moodily away.

"Content you, Olivia! Ask me not! You do not believe. You would not if I told you, and it is better so. What the astrologer foretold I shall tell no one."

"The carriage waits, my lady," a servant said, entering. "Lady Helen bade me remind you, my lady, it is time to start for church."

Lady Kingsland hastily glanced at her watch.

"Why, so it is! I had nearly forgotten! Come, Sir Jasper, and forget your gloom and superstitious fears on this happy day."

She led him from the room. Baby, in its christening-robos, slept in nurse's arms, and Lady Helen and Mr. Carlyon stood impatiently waiting.

"We will certainly be late," Lady Helen, who was god-mamma, said, fussily. "Had we not better depart at once, Sir Jasper?"

"I am quite at your ladyship's service. We will not delay an instant longer. Proceed, nurse."

Nurse, with her precious burden, went before. Sir Jasper drew Lady Helen's arm within his own, and Mr. Carlyon followed with little Mildred Kingsland.

Lady Kingsland watched the carriage out of sight, and then went slowly and thoughtfully back to her room.

"How extremely foolish and weak of Sir Jasper," she was thinking, "to pay the slightest attention to the canting nonsense of these fortune-telling impostors! If I had been in his place, I would have him horse-whipped from my gates for his pains. I must find out what this terrible prediction was, and laugh it out of my silly husband's mind."

Meantime the carriage rolled down the long avenue, under the majestic copper-beeches, through the lofty gates, and along the bright sunlit road leading to the village.

In stole and surplice, within the village church, the Rev. Cyrus Green, rector of Stonehaven, stood by the baptismal font, waiting to baptize the heir of all the Kingslands.

A few loiterers stood round the entrance—a few were scattered amongst the pews, staring with wide-open eyes as the christening procession passed in.

Stately and with head uplifted, Sir Jasper Kingsland strode up the aisle, with Lady Helen upon his arm. No trace of the trouble within

showed in his pale, set face, as he stood a little aloof and heard his son baptised Everard Jasper Carew Kingsland.

The ceremony was over. Nurse took the infant baronet again. Lady Helen adjusted her mantle, slightly awry from holding the baby, and the Rev. Cyrus Green was blandly offering his congratulations to the greatest man in the parish, when a sudden commotion at the door startled all. Some one striving to enter, and some other one refusing admission.

"Let me in, I tell you!" cried a shrill, piercing voice—the voice of an angry woman. "Stand aside, woman! I will see Sir Jasper Kingsland!"

With the last ringing word, the intruder burst past the pew-opener, and rushed wildly into the church. A weird and unearthly figure—like one of Macbeth's witches—with streaming black hair floating over a long red cloak, and two black eyes of flame. All recoiled as the spectral figure rushed up like a mad thing, and confronted Sir Jasper Kingsland.

"At last!" she shrilly cried, in a voice that pierced even to the gaping listeners without—"at last, Sir Jasper Kingsland! At last we meet again!"

There was a horrible cry as the baronet started back, putting up both hands, with a look of unutterable horror.

"Good Heaven! Zenith!"

"Yes, Zenith!" shrieked the woman. "Zenith the beautiful once! Zenith the hag, the crone, the mad woman now! Look at me well, Sir Jasper Kingsland—for the ruin is your own handiwork!"

He stood like a man paralyzed—speechless, stunned—his face the livid hue of death.

The wretched woman stood before him, with streaming hair and blazing eyes and uplifted arm—a very incarnate fury.

"Look at me well!" she fiercely shrieked, tossing her locks of eld off her fiery face. "Am I like the Zenith of twenty years ago—young, and beautiful, and bright enough even for the fastidious Englishman to love? Look at me now—ugly and old, and wrinkled and wretched, deserted and despised, and tell me if I have not greater reason to hate you than ever woman had to hate man!"

She tossed her arms aloft with a mad woman's shriek—crying out her words in a long, wild scream.

"I hate you—I hate you! Villain—dastard—perjured wretch! I hate you, and I curse you here in the church you call holy! I curse you, with a ruined woman's curse; and hot and seething may it burn on your head, and on the heads of your children's children!"

The last horrible scream, the last horrible

words aroused the listeners from their petrified trance. The Rev. Cyrus Green lifted up his voice in a ringing tone of command :

"This woman is mad ! She is a furious lunatic ! Dawson—Humphreys—come here and secure her !"

But before the words were spoken, the mad woman's eyes had fallen upon the nurse and baby.

"The child—the child !" she cried, with a screech of demoniac delight. "The child of the viper is within my grasp !"

One plunge forward, and the infant heir was in her arms, held high aloft. One second later, and its blood and brains would have bespattered the stone floor, but Mr. Carlyon sprang forward and wrenched it from her grasp.

The two men summoned by the clergyman closed upon her and held her fast. It took all their united strength for a few moments. She struggled with a mad woman's might ; her frantic shrieks rang to the roof. Then suddenly all ceased, and, foaming and livid, she fell between them in an epileptic fit—a dreadful sight to see !

CHAPTER V.

ZENITH'S MALEDICTION.

A dead pause of blank consternation ; the faces around a sight to see. Horror and wonder in every countenance—most of all in the countenance of Sir Jasper Kingsland. Dead and in his coffin, the baronet would never look more horribly livid than he did now.

The clergyman was the first to recover presence of mind—the first to speak.

"The woman is stark mad," he said. "We must see about this. Such violent lunatics must not be allowed to go at large. Here, Humphreys, do you and Dawson lift her up and carry her to my house. It is nearest, and she can be properly attended to there."

"You know her, Sir Jasper—do you not?" asked Lady Helen, with quick, womanly intuition, looking with keen, suspicious eyes into the baronet's ghastly face.

"Know her?" Sir Jasper replied, in a stunned sort of way—"know Zenith ! Great Heaven, I thought she was dead !"

The Rev. Cyrus Green and Lady Helen exchanged glances. Mr. Carlyon looked in sharp surprise at the speaker.

"Then she is *not* mad, after all. I thought she mistook you for some one else. If you know her, you have the best right to deal with her. Shall these men take her to Kingsland Court?"

"Not for ten thousand worlds?" Sir Jasper cried, impetuously. "The woman is nothing—

less than nothing to me. I knew her once, years ago. I thought her dead and buried—hence the shock her sudden entrance gave me. A lunatic asylum is the proper place for such as she. Let Mr. Green send her there, and the sooner the better."

He turned away from the sight upon the floor ; but though he strove to speak carelessly, his face was bloodless as the face of a corpse.

The Rev. Cyrus Green looked with grave, suspicious eyes for a moment at the leaden face of the speaker.

"There is wrong and mystery about this," he thought—"a dark mystery of guilt. This woman is mad, but her wrongs have driven her mad ; and you, Sir Jasper Kingsland, are her wronger."

"It shall be as you say, Sir Jasper," he said, aloud—"that is, if I find this poor creature has no friends. Are you aware whether she has any?"

"I tell you I know nothing of her !" the baronet cried, with fierce impatience. "What should I know of such a wretch as that?"

"More than you dare tell, Sir Jasper Kingsland !" cried a high, ringing voice, as a young woman rushed impetuously into the church and up the aisle. "Coward and liar ! False, perjured wretch ! You are too white-livered even to tell the truth ! What should you know of such a wretch as that, forsooth ! Doubledyed traitor and dastard, look *me* in the face if you dare, and tell me you don't know her !"

Every one shrank in terror and dismay. Sir Jasper stood as a man might stand suddenly struck by lightning. And if looks were lightning, the blazing eyes of the young woman might have blasted him where he stood. A tall and handsome young woman, with black eyes of fire, streaming, raven hair, and a brown gipsy face.

"Who are you, in mercy's name?" cried the Rev. Cyrus Green.

The great black eyes turned with flashing quickness upon him.

"I am the daughter of this wretch, as your baronet is pleased to call my mad mother. Yes, Mr. Green, she is my mother. If you want to know who my father is, you had better ask Sir Jasper Kingsland."

"It is false !" the baronet cried, the dead white of intense terror changing suddenly to rushing crimson. "I know nothing of you or your father. I never set eyes on you before."

"Wait, wait, wait !" the Rev. Cyrus Green cried, imploringly. "For Heaven's sake, young woman, don't make a scene before all these gaping listeners ! We will have your mother conveyed into the vestry until she recovers ; and if she ever recovers, no time is to be lost in attending to her. Sir Jasper, I

think the child had better be sent home immediately. My lady will wonder at the delay."

A faint wail from the infant lying in the nurse's arms seconded the suggestion. That feeble cry, and the mention of his wife, acted as a magic spell upon the baronet.

"These mad intruders have startled us into forgetting everything else. Proceed, nurse. Lady Helen, take my arm. Mr. Carlyon, see to Mildred. The child looks frightened to death, and little wonder."

"Little, indeed!" sighed Lady Helen. "I shall not recover the shock for a month. It was like a scene in a melodrama—like a chapter of a sensation novel. And you know that dreadful creature, Sir Jasper?"

"I used to know her," the baronet said, with emphasis; "so many years ago, that I had almost forgotten she ever existed. She was always more or less mad, I fancy, and it seems hereditary. Her daughter—if daughter she be—seems as distraught as her mother."

"And her name, Sir Jasper? You called her by some name, I think."

"Zenith, I suppose. To tell the truth, Lady Helen"—trying to laugh carelessly—"the woman is neither more nor less than a gipsy fortune-teller, crazed by a villainous life and villainous liquor. But, for the sake of the days gone by, when she was young and pretty, and told my fortune, I think I will go back and see what Mr. Green intends doing with her. Such crazy vagrants should not be allowed to go at large."

The light tone was a ghastly failure, and the smile but a death's-head grin. He placed Lady Helen in the carriage; Mr. Carlyon assisted the nurse and little Mildred. Then Sir Jasper gave the order, "Home," and the stately carriage of the Kingslands, with its emblazoned crest, whirled away in a cloud of dust. For an instant he stood looking after it. The smile faded, and his face blackened with a bitter, vindictive scowl.

"Curses on it!" he muttered between set teeth. "After all these years, are those dead doings to be flung in my face? I thought her dead and gone, and lo! in the hour of my triumph she rises as if from the grave to confound me. Her daughter too! I never knew she had a child! Good heavens! how these wild oats we sow in youth flourish and multiply with their bitter, bad fruit! I sowed mine broadcast, and a sweet harvest home I am likely to have."

He turned and strode into the vestry. On the floor the miserable woman lay, her eyes closed, her jaw fallen—the upturned face awfully corpse-like in the garish sunshine.

By her side, supporting her head, the younger woman knelt, holding a glass of water to her lips. The Rev. Cyrus Green stood gravely looking on.

"Is she dead?" Sir Jasper asked, in a hard voice.

It was to the clergyman he spoke, but the girl looked fiercely up, her black eyes glittering, her tones like a serpent's hiss.

"Not dead, Sir Jasper Kingsland! No thanks to you for it. Murderer—as much a murderer as if you had cut her throat—look on her, and be proud of the ruin you have wrought!"

"Silence, woman!" Mr. Green ordered, imperiously. "We will have none of your mad recrimination here. She is not dead, Sir Jasper, but she is dying, I think. This young woman wishes to remove her—whither I know not; but it is simply impossible. That unfortunate creature will not be alive when to-morrow dawns."

"What do you propose doing with her?" the baronet asked, steadily.

"We will convey her to the sexton's house—it is very neat. I have sent Dawson for a stretcher; he and Humphreys will carry her. This young woman declines to give her name, or tell who she is, or where she lives."

"Where I live is no affair of yours, if I cannot take my mother there," the young woman answered, sullenly. "Who I am, you know. I told you I am this woman's daughter."

"And a gipsy, I take it?" said Mr. Green.

"You guess well, sir, but only half the truth. Half gipsy I am, and half gentlewoman. A mongrel, I suppose, that makes; and yet it is well to have good blood in one's veins, even on the father's side."

There was a sneering emphasis in her words, and the glittering, snakey black eyes gleamed like daggers on the baronet's face.

But that proud face was set and rigid as stone now. He returned her look with a haughty stare.

"It is a pity the whipping-post has been abolished," he said, harshly. "Your impertinence makes you a fit subject for it, mistress! Take care we don't commit you to prison as a public vagrant, and teach the tongue of yours a little civility when addressing your betters."

"My betters!" the girl hissed, in a fierce, sibilant whisper. "Why, yes, I suppose a daughter *should* look upon a father in that light. As to the whipping-post and prison, try it at your peril! Try it if you dare, Sir Jasper Kingsland!"

She rose up and confronted him until he quailed.

Before he could speak, the door opened, and Dawson entered with a stretcher.

"Lay her upon it and remove her at once," the rector said, very glad of the interruption. "Here, Humphreys, this side. Gently, my men—gently. Be very careful on the way."

The two men placed the seemingly lifeless form of Zenith on the stretcher, and bore her carefully away.

The daughter, Zara, followed, her eyes never quitting that rigid face.

"She will not live until to-morrow morning," the rector said. "And it is better so, poor soul. She is evidently hopelessly insane."

"And the daughter appears but little better. By the way, Mr. Green, Lady Kingsland desires me to take you back to dinner."

The rector bowed.

"Her ladyship is very good. Has your carriage gone? I will order out the pony phaeton, if you like."

Ten minutes later, the two gentlemen were bowling along the pleasant country road leading to the court. It was a very silent drive, for the baronet sat moodily staring at vacancy, his hat pulled over his brow, his mouth set in hard, wordless pain.

"They will tell Olivia," he was thinking, gloomily. "What will she say to all this?"

But his fear seemed groundless. Lady Kingsland treated the matter with cool indifference. To be sure, she had not quite heard all. A mad woman had burst into the church, had terrified Lady Helen pretty nearly to death with her crazy language, and had tried to tear away the baby. That was the discreet story my lady heard, and which she was disposed to treat with calm surprise. Baby was safe, and it had ended in nothing. The mad woman was being properly cared for. Lady Kingsland quietly dismissed the little incident altogether before the end of dinner.

The hours of the evening wore on—very long hours to the lord of Kingsland Court, seated at the head of his table, dispensing his hospitalities and trying to listen to the long stories of Mr. Carlyon and the rector.

It was worse in the drawing-room, with the lights, and the music, and his stately wife at the piano, and Lady Helen at his side, prattling with little Mildred over a pile of engravings. All the time, in a half-distracted sort of way, his thoughts were wandering to the sexton's cottage and the woman dying therein—the woman he had thought dead years ago—dying there in desolation and misery—and here the hours seemed strung on roses. And once he had loved Zenith!

It was all over at last. The guests were gone, the baby baronet slept in his crib, and

Lady Kingsland had gone to her chamber. But Sir Jasper lingered still, wandering up and down the long drawing-room like a restless ghost.

A sweet-voiced clock on the mantel chimed twelve. Ere its last chime had sounded, a sleepy valet stood in the doorway.

"A messenger for you, Sir Jasper—sent by the Rev. Mr. Green. Here, come in."

Thus invoked, Mr. Dawson entered, pulling his forelock.

"Parson, he sent me, zur. She be a-doying—she be."

He knew instantly who the man meant. He had expected and waited for this.

"And she wishes to see me?"

"She calls for you all the time, zur. She be a-doying uncommon hard. Parson bid me come and tell 'ee."

"Very well, my man," the baronet said. "That will do. I will go at once. Thomas, order my horse, and fetch my riding-cloak and gloves."

The valet stared in astonishment, but went to obey. It was something altogether without precedent, this queer proceeding on the part of his master; and, taken in connection with that other odd event in church, looked remarkably suspicious.

The night was dark and starless, and the wind blew raw and bleak, as the baronet dashed down the avenue and out into the high road. He almost wondered at himself for complying with the dying woman's desire, but some inward impulse quite beyond his control seemed driving him on.

He rode rapidly, and a quarter of an hour brought him to the sexton's cottage. A feeble light glimmered from the window out into the pitch-blackness of the night. A moment later and he stood within in the presence of the dying.

The Rev. Cyrus Green sat by the table, a Bible in his hand. Kneeling by the bedside, her face ghastly white, her burning black eyes dry and tearless, was the young woman. And like a dead woman already, stretched on the bed, lay Zenith.

But she was not dead. At the sound of the opening door, at the sound of his entrance, she opened her eyes, dulling fast in death, and fixed them with a hungry glare on Sir Jasper.

"I knew you would come!" she said, in a husky whisper. "You dare not stay away! The spirit of the dying Zenith drove you here in spite of yourself. Come nearer—nearer! Sir Jasper Kingsland, don't hover aloof. Once you could never be near enough. Ah, I was young and fair then. I'm old and ugly now. Come nearer, for I cannot speak aloud, and

listen. Do you know why I have sent for you?"

He had approached the bedside. She caught his hand and held it in a vice-like clutch, her fierce eyes burning upon his face.

"No," he said, recoiling.

"To give you my dying malediction—to curse you, with my latest breath! I hate you, Sir Jasper Kingsland, falsest of all mankind; and if the dead can return and torment the living, then do you beware of me."

She spoke in panting gasps, the death-rattle sounding in her skinny throat. Shocked and scandalized, the rector interposed:

"My good woman, don't! For pity's sake, don't say such horrible things!"

But she never heeded him. The glazing eyes glared with tigerish hate upon the man beside her, even through the films of death.

"I hate you!" she said, with a last effort. "I die hating you, and I curse you with a dying woman's curse! May your life be a life of torment, of misery, and remorse! May your son's life be blighted and ruined! May he become an outcast among men! May sin and shame follow him for ever, and all of his abhorred race!"

Her voice died away. She glared helplessly up from the pillow, unable to speak. A deep, stern, terrible "Amen!" came from her daughter's lips; then, with a spasm, she half leaped from the bed, and fell back, with a gurgling cry—*dead!*

"She is gone," said the rector, with a shudder. "Heaven have mercy on her sinful soul!"

The baronet staggered back from the bed, his face utterly livid.

"I never saw a more horrible sight!" continued the Rev. Cyrus. "I never heard such horrible words! No wonder it has unmanned you, Sir Jasper. Pray sit down and drink this."

He held out a glass of water. Sir Jasper seized and drank it, his brain reeling, for a moment or two quite unable to stand.

With stoical calm, Zara had arisen and closed the dead woman's eyes, folded the hands, straightened the stiffening limbs, and composed the humble covering. She shed no tears, she uttered no cry; her face was stern as stone.

"Better stay in this ghastly place no longer, Sir Jasper," the rector suggested. "You look completely overcome. I will see that everything is properly done. We will see to her burial."

As a man walks in a dreadful dream, Sir Jasper arose, quitted the room, mounted his horse, and rode away.

One dark, menacing glance Zara shot after him; then she sat stonily down by her dead. All that night, all next day, Zara kept her post, neither eating, drinking, nor sleeping. Dry and tearless, the burning black eyes fixed themselves on the dead face, and never left it.

When they put the dead woman in the rude board coffin, she offered no resistance. Calmly she watched them screw the lid down; calmly she saw them raise it on their shoulders and bear it away. Without a word or tear she arose, folded her cloak about her, and followed them to the churchyard.

It was late in the afternoon when the interment was over—a bleak and gusty afternoon. A sky of lead hung low over a black earth, and the chill blasts shuddered ghostly through the trees.

One by one the stragglers departed, and Zara was left alone by the new-made grave. No, not quite alone; for through the bleak twilight flattered the tall, dark figure of a man towards her. She lifted her gloomy eyes, and recognized him.

"You come, Sir Jasper Kingsland," she said, slowly, "to see the last of your work. You come to gloat over your dead victim, and exult that she is out of your way. But I tell you to beware! Zenith in her grave will be a thousand times more terrible to you than Zenith ever was alive!"

The baronet looked at her with a darkly-troubled face.

"Why do you hate me so?" he said. "Whatever wrong I did her, I never wronged you."

"You have done me deadly wrong! My mother's wrongs are mine, and here by her grave I vow vengeance on you and yours! Her dying legacy to me was her hatred of you, and I will pay the old debt with double interest, my noble, haughty, titled father."

She turned, with the last words, and sped away like an evil spirit, vanishing in the gloom among the graves.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO DYING BEQUESTS.

The midsummer night was sultry and still. The darkness was like the darkness of Egypt, lit every now and then by a vivid flash of lightning, from what quarter of the heavens no man knew. The inky sky was invisible—no breath of air stirred the terrible calm. The midsummer night was full of dark and deadly menace.

Hours ago, a fierce and wrathful sunset had burned itself out in a brassy sky. The sun, a lurid ball of fire, had sunk in billows of blood-

red cloud, and pitch blackness had fallen upon earth, and sky, and sea. Everything above and below breathed of speedy and awful tempest, but the midnight was drawing near, and the storm had not yet burst.

And on this bad, black June night, Sir Jasper Kingsland lay on his stately bed, dying.

The lofty chamber was but dimly lit. It was a grand, vast room, panelled in black oak, hung with sombre draperies, and carpeted in rich dark Brussels.

Three wax candles made white spots of light in the solemn gloom—a wood fire burned, or rather smouldered, in the wide hearth, for the vast rooms were chilly even in midsummer; but neither fire-light nor candle-light could illumine the ghostly depths of the chamber. Shadows crouched, like evil things, in the dusky corners; and round the bed, only darker shadows among the rest, knelt the dying man's family—wife, and daughter, and son. And hovering aloof, with pale, anxious faces, stood the rector, the Rev. Cyrus Green, and Dr. Parker Godroy of the village.

The last hope was over—the last prayer had been said—the last faint breaths fluttered between the dying lips. With the tide going out on the shore below, the baronet's life was ebbing.

"Olivia!"

Lady Kingsland, kneeling in tearless grief by her husband's side, bent over him to catch the faint whisper.

"My dearest, I am here. What is it?"

"Where is Everard?"

Everard Kingsland, a fair-haired, blue-eyed, handsome boy, lifted his head from the opposite side. It was a handsome, high-bred face—the ancestral face of all the Kingslands—that of this twelve-year-old boy.

"Here, papa!"

The weak head turned slowly; the eyes, dulling in death, fixed themselves on that fair, youthful face in a gaze of deathless love.

"My boy, my boy, whom I have loved so well—whom I have shielded so tenderly! My precious, only son! I must leave you at last."

The boy stifled a sob as he bent and kissed the icy cold face. Young as he was, he had the gravity and self-repression of manhood already.

"I have loved you better than my own life," the faint, whispering voice went on. "I would have died to save you an hour of pain. I have kept the *one* secret of my life well—a secret that has blighted it before its time—but I cannot face the dread unknown and bear my secret with me. On my death-bed I must tell all, and my darling boy must bear the blow."

Everard Kingsland listened to his father's

huskily-murmured words in boyish wonderment. What secret was he talking of? He glanced across at his mother, and to his increased surprise saw her pale cheeks suddenly flushed, and her calm eyes kindling.

"No living soul has ever heard from me what I must tell you to-night, my Everard—not even your mother. Do not leave me, Olivia. You, too, must know all, that you may guard your son—that you may pity and forgive me. Perhaps I have erred in keeping any secret from you, but the truth was too horrible to tell. There have been times when the thought of it nearly drove me mad. How, then, could I tell the wife I loved—the son I idolized—this cruel and shameful thing?"

The glazing eyes rolled in piteous appeal from one to the other. The youthful Everard looked simply bewildered—Lady Kingsland, excited, expectant, flushed.

She gently wiped the clammy brow, and held a reviving cordial to the livid lips.

"My dearest, do not agitate yourself," she said. "We will listen to all you have to say, and love you none the less, let it be what it will."

"My own dear wife, half the secret you know already. You remember the astrologer—the prediction?"

"Surely! You have never been the same man since that fatal night. It is of the prediction you would speak?"

"It is. I must tell my son. I must warn him of the unutterable horror to come. Oh, my boy, my boy—what will become of you when you learn your horrible doom?"

"Papa," the lad said, softly, but growing very white, "I don't understand. *What* horror?—*what* doom? Tell me, and see how I will bear it. I am a Kingsland, you know, and the son of a daring race."

"That is my brave boy! Send them out of the room, Olivia—priest, doctor, Mildred, and all; then come close to me—close, close, for my voice is failing—and listen."

Lady Kingsland arose—fair and stately still as twelve years before, and eminently self-sustained in this trying hour. In half a minute she had turned out rector, physician, and daughter, and knelt again by that bed of death. The lightning glittered athwart the gloom—the warning moan of the coming storm, heard in the mighty voice of the sea, sounded terribly distinct in that silent room—and, grimly waiting, Death stood in their midst.

"The first part of my story, Olivia," began the dying man, "belongs to you. Years before I knew you, when I was a young, hot-headed, rashly-impulsive boy, travelling in Spain, I fell

in with a gang of wandering gipsies. I had been robbed and wounded by mountain brigands. These gipsies found me, took me to their tents, cared for me, cured me. But long after I was well I lingered with them, for the fairest thing the sun shone on was my black-eyed nurse, Zenith. We were both so young and so fiery-blooded, so— Ah, what need to go over the old, old ground? There was one hour of mad, brief bliss, parting, and forgetfulness. I forgot. Life was a long, idle summer holiday to me. But she never forgot—never forgave! You remember the woman, Olivia, who burst into the church on the day of our boy's christening—the woman who died in the sexton's cottage? That woman was Zenith—old and withered, and maddened by her wrongs—that woman, who died cursing me and mine! A girl, dark, and fierce, and terrible as herself, stood by her to the last, lingered at her grave, to vow deathless revenge—her daughter and mine!”

The faint voice ceased an instant. Lady Kingsland had drawn back into the shadow of the curtains, and her face could not be seen. The fluttering spirit rallied and resumed:

“I have reason to know that daughter was married. I have reason to know she had a child—whether boy or girl I cannot tell. To that child the inheritance of hatred and revenge will fall. That child, some inward prescience tells me, will wreak deep and awful vengeance for the past. Beware of the grandchild of Zenith, the gipsy—beware, Olivia, for yourself and your son!”

There was a pause. Then—

“Is this all?” Olivia said, in a constrained, hard voice.

“All I have to say to you—the rest is for Everard. My son, on the night of your birth an Eastern astrologer came to this house and cast your horoscope. He gave that horoscope to me at day-dawn, and departed, and from that hour to this I have neither seen him nor heard of him. Before reading your future in the stars, he looked into my palm and told me the past—told me the story of Zenith and her wrongs—told me what no one under heaven but myself knew. My boy, the revelation of that night has blighted my life—broken my heart! The unutterable horror of *your* future has brought my grey hairs in sorrow to the grave. Oh, my son! What will become of you when I am gone?”

The boy looked in blank consternation at the ghastly, convulsed face. The dying voice was almost inaudible now—the breath came in panting gasps—the clock was near the stroke of midnight—the tide was all but at its lowest ebb.

“What was it, papa?” the lad asked.
“What has the future in store for me?”

A convulsive spasm distorted the livid face, the eyeballs rolled, the death-rattle sounded. With a smothered cry of terror, Lady Kingsland lifted the agonized head in her arms.

“Quick, Jasper—the horoscope! Where?”
“My safe—study—secret spring—at back! Oh, heaven have mercy!”

The clock struck sharply *twelve*! A vivid blaze of lambent lightning lit the room: the awful death-rattle sounded once more.

“Beware of Zenith's grandchild!”

He spoke the words aloud, clear and distinct, and never spoke again. With that warning on his lips, his head fell heavily back, he turned his glazed eyes on the son he loved, and so died.

* * * * *

Many miles away from Kingsland Court, that same sultry, oppressive midsummer night, a third-rate theatre on the Surrey side of London was crowded to overflowing. There was a grand spectacular drama, full of transformation scenes, fairies, demons, spirits of air, fire, and water, a brazen orchestra blowing forth, and steam, and orange peel, and suffocation generally.

Foremost among all the fairies and nymphs, noted for the shortness of her filmy skirts, the supple beauty of her shapely limbs, her incomparable dancing, and her dark, bright beauty, flashed La Sylphine before the footlights.

The best *danseuse* in the kingdom, and the prettiest, and invested with a magic halo of romance, La Sylphine shone like a meteor among lesser stars, and brought down thunders of applause every time she appeared.

The little feet twinkled and flashed; the long, dark waves of hair floated in a shining banner behind her to the tiny waist; the pale, unpraised face—the eyes ablaze like black stars. Oh, surely La Sylphine was the loveliest thing that hot, June night, the gaslight shone on!

The fairy spectacle was over—the green drop-curtain fell. La Sylphine had smiled, and dipped, and kissed hands to thundering bravoes for the last time that night, and now, behind the scenes, was rapidly exchanging the spangles and gossamer of fairydom for the shabby merino and faded shawl and dingy straw hat of every-day life.

“You danced better than ever to-night, Miss Monti,” a tall demon in tail and horns said, sauntering up to her. “Them pretty feet of yours will make your fortune yet.”

“Not to mention her pretty face,” said a

brother fiend, removing his horrible mask. "Her fortune's made already, if she's a mind to take it. There's a gay young city swell awaiting at the wings to see you home, Miss Monti." La Sylphine laughed.

"Is it Maynard the banker's son?" she asked.

The second demon nodded.

"Then I must escape by the side entrance. When he gets tired of waiting, Mr. Smithers, give him La Sylphine's compliments, and let him go."

She laughed again—soft and silvery; glided past the demons, down a dark and winding staircase, and out into the noisy, lighted street.

The girl paused an instant under a street lamp. She was only a girl—fifteen or sixteen at most, though very tall, with a bright, fearless, precocious look. Then, drawing her shawl closely round her slender figure, she flitted rapidly away.

The innumerable city clocks tolled heavily—eleven. The night was pitch dark; the sheet-lightning blazed across the blackness, and now and then a big drop fell. Still the girl sped on, swiftly, surely, looking neither to the right nor left, until her destination was reached.

It was the poorest and vilest quarter of the great city, among reeking smells, and horrible sounds, and disgusting sights. The house she entered was tottering to decay—a dreadful den by day and by night, thronged with the very scum of London streets. Up and up a long stairway she flew, paused at a door on the third landing, opened it and went in.

It was a miserable room—all one could have expected from the street and the house. There was a black grate, one or two broken chairs, a battered table, and a wretched bed in the corner. On the bed, a woman—the ghastly skeleton of a woman—lay dying. A guttering tallow-candle, flaming wildly, lit the miserable scene.

The opening of the door and the entrance of La Sylphine aroused the woman from the stupor into which she had fallen—the stupor which precedes death. She opened her spectral eyes and looked eagerly round.

"My Sunbeam, is it thou?"

"It is I, mother—at last. I could come no sooner. The ballet was very long to-night."

The weird eyes of the sick woman lit up with a sudden flane.

"And my Sunbeam was encored, and crowned with flowers, and admired beyond all, was she not?"

"Yes, mother. But never mind that. How are you to-night?"

"Dying, my own!"

The *danseuse* fell on her knees with a shrill, sharp cry.

"No, mother—no, no, no! Not dying! Very ill, very weak, very low, but not dying. Oh, not dying!"

"Dying, my daughter!" the sick woman said, solemnly. "I count my life by minutes now. I heard the city clocks strike eleven; I counted the strokes, for, my Sunbeam, it is the last hour poor Zara, thy mother, will ever hear on earth."

The ballet-dancer covered her face with a low, despairing cry. The dying mother, with a painful effort, lifted her own skeleton hand, and removed those of the girl.

"Weep not, but listen, *carissima*. I have much to say to thee before I go. I feared to die before you came; and even in my grave I could not rest with the words I must say unsaid. I have a legacy to leave thee, my daughter."

"A legacy!"

The girl opened her great, black eyes in wide surprise.

"Even so. Not of lands, or houses, or gold, or honours, but something a thousandfold greater—an inheritance of hatred and revenge."

"My mother!"

"Listen to me, my daughter, and my dying malediction be upon thee if thou fulfillst not the trust. Thou hast heard the name of Kingsland?"

La Sylphine's face darkened, vindictively.

"Ay, my mother—often, from my father, ere he died—from thee, since. Was it not his last command to me—this hatred of their evil race? Did I not promise him on his death-bed, four years ago? Does my mother think I forget?"

"That is my brave daughter! You knew the cruel story of treachery and wrong done thy grandmother, Zenith—you know the prediction your father made to my father, Sir Jasper Kingsland, on the night of his son's birth. Be it thine, my brave daughter, to see that prediction fulfilled."

A slight shiver shook her tender frame; her dark face blanched.

"You ask a terrible thing, my mother," she said, slowly; "but I can refuse you nothing, and I abhor them all. I promise—the prediction shall be fulfilled!"

"My own—my own! That son is a boy of twelve now. Find him, and work the retribution of the gods. Your grandmother, your father, your mother look to you from their graves for vengeance. Woe to you if you fail!"

"I shall not fail!" the girl said, solemnly. "I can die, but I cannot break a promise. Vengeance shall fall, fierce and terrible, upon the heir of Kingsland, and mine shall be the

hand to inflict it. I swear it, by your death-bed, mother, and I will keep my oath!"

The mother pressed her hand; she was too far gone for words. The film of death was in her eyes, its grey shadow on her face. She strove to speak—only a husky rattle came; there was a quick, dreadful convulsion from head to foot, then an awful calm.

Within the same hour, with miles between them, Sir Jasper Kingsland and Zara, his outcast daughter, died.

* * * * *

The dawn of another day crept sullenly over the Devon hill-tops as Lady Kingsland arose from her husband's death-bed—a sullen day, of wet and gloom; a leaden sky, a drenched earth; no sound to be heard, save the ceaseless drip, drip of the melancholy rain.

White, and stark, and rigid, the late lord of Kingsland Court lay in the awful majesty of death.

The doctor, the rector, the nurse, sat, pale and sombre watchers, in the death-room. More than an hour before the youthful baronet had been sent to his room, worn out with his night's watching.

It was the Rev. Cyrus Green who urged my lady now to follow him.

"You look utterly exhausted, my dear Lady Kingsland," he said. "Pray retire and endeavour to sleep. You are not able to endure such fatigue."

The lady rose, wearily, very, very pale, but tearless.

"I am worn out," she said. "I believe I will lie down, but I feel as though I should never sleep again."

She quitted the room, but not to seek her room. Outside the death-chamber she paused an instant, and her haggard face lit suddenly up, as a vase might with a light within.

"Now is my time," she said, under her breath. "A few hours more and it may be too late. His safe, he said—the secret spring!"

She flitted away, pallid and guilty-looking, into Sir Jasper's study. It was deserted, of course, and there in the corner stood the grim iron safe. Lady Kingsland locked the door, drew a bunch of keys from her pocket, and approached it.

"It is well I took the keys from under the pillow before those curious people came in. Now for the secrets of the dead! No fortune-telling jugglery shall blight my darling boy's life whilst I can help it. He is as superstitious as his father."

With considerable difficulty she opened the safe, pulled forth drawer after drawer, until the grim iron back was exposed.

"The secret spring is here," she muttered. "Surely, surely I can find it."

For many minutes she searched in vain; then her glance fell on a tiny steel knob inserted in a corner. She pressed this with all her might, confident of success.

Nor was she deceived. The knob moved, the iron slid slowly back, disclosing a tiny, hidden drawer, in what appeared the solid frame.

Lady Kingsland barely repressed a cry as she saw the paper, and by its side something wrapped in silver tissue. Greedily she snatched both out, pressed back the knob, locked the safe, stole out of the study, and up to her own room.

Panting with her haste, my lady sank into a seat, with her treasures eagerly clutched. A moment recovered her; then she took up the little parcel wrapped in the silver paper.

"He said nothing of this," she thought. "What can it be?"

She tore off the wrapping. As it fell to the floor, a long tress of silky black hair fell with it, and she held in her hand a miniature painted on ivory. A girlish face of exquisite beauty, dusky as the face of an Indian queen, looked up at her, fresh and bright as thirty years before. No need to look at the words on the reverse—"My peerless Zenith"—to know who it was. The wife's jealousy told her at the first glance.

"And all these years he kept this," she said, between her set teeth, "whilst he pretended he loved only me! 'My peerless Zenith!' Yes, she is beautiful as the fabled hours of the Mussulman's paradise. Well, I will keep it in my turn. Who knows what end it may serve yet?"

Who, indeed? She picked up the tress of blue-black hair, and enveloped all in the silver paper once more. Then she lifted the folded document, and looked darkly at the superscription:

Horoscope of the heir of Kingsland!

"Which the heir of Kingsland shall never see," she said, grimly unfolding it. "Now for this mighty secret!"

She just glanced at the mystic symbols, the cabalistic signs and figures, and turned to the other side. There, beautifully written, in long, clear letters, she saw her son's fate.

The morning wore on—noon came. The house was as still as a tomb. Rosine, my lady's maid, ventured to tap at her ladyship's door with a cup of tea. There was no response.

"She sleeps," thought Rosine, as she turned the handle.

But at the threshold she paused in wild alarm. No, my lady did not sleep. She sat in her chair, upright and ghastly as a galvanized

corpse, a written paper closely clutched in her hand, and a look of white horror frozen on her face.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER TEN YEARS.

"I have said it, and I mean it. They ought to know me well enough by this time, Godsoe. I'd transport every man of them, the poaching scoundrels, if I could. Tell that villain Dick Darkly that the first time I catch him at his old tricks, he shall follow the brother he makes such a howling about, and share his fate."

Sir Everard Kingsland was the speaker. He stood with one hand, white and shapely as a lady's, resting on the glossy neck of his bay horse, his fair, handsome face flushed with anger, turned upon his gamekeeper.

There was an imperious ring in his voice, an imperious flash in his steel-blue eyes, that showed how accustomed he was to command—how unaccustomed to any power save his own.

Peter Godsoe, the sturdy gamekeeper, standing before his young master, hat in hand, looked up deprecatingly.

"He takes it very hard, Sir Everard, that you sent his brother to Worrel gaol. His missis was sick, and two of the children had the measles, and Will Darkly he'd been out o' work, and they was poor as poor. So he turns to and snares the rabbits, and"—

"Godsoe, are *you* trying to excuse this convicted poacher? Is that what you stopped me here to say?" asked the baronet, angrily.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Everard. I only wanted to warn you—to put you on your guard"—

He stopped confusedly, as the fair Saxon face of his master grew darker and darker.

"To warn me—to put me on my guard! What do you mean, fellow? Has that villainous poacher dared to threaten *me*?"

"Not in my hearing, sir; but others say so. And he's a dark, vindictive brute; and he swore a solemn oath, they say, when his brother went to Worrel gaol, to be revenged upon you! And so, Sir Everard, begging your pardon for the freedom, I thought as how you was likely to be out late to-night, coming home from my lord's, and as Brithlow Wood is lonesome and dark"—

"That will do, Godsoe!" the young baronet interrupted, haughtily. "You mean well, I daresay, and I overlook your presumption this time; but never proffer advice to me again! As for Darkly, he had better keep out of my way. I'll horsewhip him within an inch of his life the first time I see him, and send him to

make acquaintance with the horse-pond afterwards."

He vaulted lightly into the saddle as he spoke. Tall and slender, and somewhat effeminate in his handsome youth, he yet looked a gallant cavalier enough astride his bay thoroughbred.

The brawny gamekeeper stood gazing after him as he ambled down the leafy avenue, a grim smile on his sunburnt face.

"His father's son," he said—"the proudest gentleman in Devonshire, and the most headstrong. You'll horsewhip Dick Darkly, Sir Everard! Why, he could take you with one hand by the waistband, and lay you low in the kennel any day if he liked. And he'll do it, too," muttered Godsoe, shaking his head and turning slowly away. "You won't be warned, and you won't take precaution, and you won't condescend to be afraid, and you'll meet Dick Darkly in the woods, and you'll come to grief afore you know it."

The gamekeeper disappeared in the plantation, and the youthful baronet rode out through his own lofty entrance gates into the pleasant high road beyond.

The misty autumn twilight lay like a veil of silver-blue over the peaceful English landscape, a cool breeze swept up from the sea over the golden downs and distant hills, and as Sir Everard rode along through the village the cloud left his face, and a tender, dreamy look came in its place.

"*She* will be present, of course," he thought. "I wonder if I shall find her as I left her last? She is not the kind that play fast and loose, my stately, uplifted Lady Louise. How queenly she looked at the reception last night in those velvet robes and the Carteret diamonds!—'Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls.' She is my elder by three round years at least, but she is as stately as a princess, and at twenty-five preserves the ripe bloom of seventeen. She is all that is gracious when we meet, and my mother has set her heart upon the match. I have half a mind to propose this very night."

There was no rapture in the young man's mind at the thought. His blood flowed coolly and his pulses beat calmly whilst he turned the tender subject over in his mind, and he was only two-and-twenty.

She was an earl's daughter, this stately Lady Louise, but so very impoverished an earl that the young Devonshire baronet, with his ancient name and his long rent-roll, was a most desirably brilliant match.

She was down on a visit to her brother, Lord Carteret, and had made a dead set at Sir Everard Kingsland from the hour she had met

him first. He was on his way to Lord Carret's now. There was a dinner party, and he was an honoured guest; and Lady Louise was brilliant, in the family diamonds and old point lace, once more.

She was in the drawing-room when he entered—her stately head regally uplifted in the midst of a group of less magnificent demoiselles—a statuesque blonde, with abundant ringlets of flaxen lightness, eyes of turquoise blue, and a determined mouth and chin.

Sir Everard paid his respects to his host and hostess, and sought her side at once.

"Almost late," she said, with a brilliant, welcoming smile, giving him her dainty little hand; "and George Grosvenor has been looking this way, and pulling his moustache and blushing redder than the carnations in his button-hole. He wants to take me into dinner, poor fellow, and he hasn't the courage to do it."

"With your kind permission, Lady Louise, I will save him the trouble," answered Sir Everard Kingsland. "Grosvenor is not singular in his wish, but I never gave him credit for so much good taste before."

Lady Louise laughed good-naturedly. Those pearly teeth lit up her face wonderfully, and she was very fond of showing them.

"Mr. Grosvenor is more at home in the hunting-field than the drawing-room, I fancy. *Apropos*, Sir Everard, I ride to the meet to-morrow. Of course you will be present."

"Of course—a fox hunt is, to me, a foretaste of celestial bliss. With a first-rate horse, a crack pack of hounds, a 'good scent,' and a fine morning, a man is tempted to wish life could last forever. And you are only going to ride to the meet, then, Lady Louise?"

"Yes; I never followed the hounds. I don't know the country, and I can't ride to points. Besides, I am not really Amazonian enough to fancy a scamper across the country, flying fences and risking my precious life. It's much nicer ambling quietly home when the hounds start, and indulging in a novel and an afternoon cup of tea."

"And much more womanly. I shouldn't have liked to say so before, but I must own that to me, a lady never looks less attractive than in a hunting-field, among yelping hounds, and shouts, and cords and tops, and scarlet coats."

"That comes of being a poet and an artist; and Sir Everard Kingsland is accused of being both. You want to fancy us all angels, and you cannot reconcile an angelic being with a side-saddle and a hard gallop. Now, I don't own to being anything in the Di Vernon line myself, and I don't wish to be; but I do admire

a spirited lady rider, and I do think a pretty girl never looks half so pretty as when well mounted. You should have seen Harrie Hunsden, as I saw her the other day, and you would surely recant your heresy about ladies and horseflesh."

"Is Harrie Hunsden a lady?"

"Certainly. Don't you know her? Ah, I forgot you have been abroad all these years, and that I know more of our neighbours than you do. She is Captain Hunsden's only daughter—Hunsden, of Hunsden Hall, over yonder—one of your oldest Devon families. You'll find them duly chronicled in Burke and Debrett. But Captain Hunsden has been abroad so much that I am not surprised at your want of information. Miss Hunsden is scarcely eighteen, but she has been over the world from Dan to Beersheba—from Quebec to Gibraltar—from Halifax to Calcutta. Two years of her life she passed at a New York boarding school, of which city, it appears, her mother was a native."

"Indeed!" Sir Everard said, just lifting his eyebrows. "And Miss Hunsden rides well?"

"Like Di Vernon's self."

"And I repeat, I don't affect the Di Vernon style. Is your Miss Hunsden pretty? and shall we see her at the meet to-morrow?"

"Yes, to both questions; and more than at the meet, I fancy. She and her thoroughbred, Whirlwind, will lead you all. Her blue habit and 'red roan steed' are as well known in the county as the duke's hounds, and her bright eyes and dashing style have taken by storm the susceptible hearts of half the fox-hunting squires of Devonshire."

She laughed a little maliciously, this vivacious Lady Louise. Truth to tell, not being quite sure that the game was safely wired, and dreading this Amazonian Miss Hunsden as a prospective rival, she was nothing loth to prejudice the fastidious young baronet beforehand, even whilst seeming to praise her.

"I am surprised that you have not heard of her," she said, in her soft accents. "Sir Harcourt Hetford and Mr. Cholmondeley actually fought a duel about her, and it ended in her telling them to their faces that they were a pair of idiots, and refusing both flatly. 'The Hunsden' is the toast of the county."

Sir Everard shuddered.

"From all such the gods deliver us! You honour Miss Hunsden with your deepest interest, I think, Lady Louise!"

"Yes, she is such an oddity. Her wandering life, I presume, accounts for it; but she is altogether unlike any girl I ever knew. I am certain"—with a little, malicious glance—"she will be your style, Sir Everard."

"And as I don't in the least know what my style is," responded Sir Everard, with infinite calm, "perhaps you may be right."

Lady Louise bit her lip—it was a rebuff, she fancied, for her detraction. And then Lady Carteret gave that mysterious signal, and the ladies rose, and swept rustling away in billows of silk to the drawing-room, and the gentlemen had the talk to themselves "across the walnuts and the wine."

To one gentleman present the interim before rejoicing the ladies was an unmitigatedly dull one, even though the talk ran on two of his favourite topics—horseflesh and hunting. He was in love, he thought, complacently, and Lady Louise's eyes had sparkled to-day, and her smiles had flashed their bewildering brightness upon him more radiantly than ever before.

"How pleased my mother will be!" Sir Everard thought, holding his wine up to the light. "I will ask Lady Louise this very night. An earl's daughter—even though a bankrupt—is a fitting mate for a Kingsland."

Lady Louise sat at the piano—a piano whose notes were as the music of the spheres—the soft light falling full on her pale, statuesque face, and making an aureole around her fair, shapely head. Her white dress, of heavy, lustreless silk, fell in classical folds round her stately figure, and the hands floating over the keys flashed with diamonds that dead-and-gone earls' daughters had worn a hundred years before.

Sir Everard Kingsland crossed over and stood beside her, and Lord and Lady Cartaret exchanged significant glances and smiled.

It was a very desirable thing indeed; they had brought Louise down for no other earthly reason, and Louise was playing her cards, and playing them well.

If Sir Everard had one taste stronger than another it was his taste for music, and Lady Louise held him spell-bound now. She played, and her fingers seemed inspired; she sang, and few non-professionals sang like that.

The chain of brittle glass that bound the captive beside her grew stronger. A wife who could bewitch the hours away with such music as this would be no undesirable possession for a *blasé* man. He stooped over her as she arose from the piano at last.

"Come out on the balcony," he said. "The night is lovely, and the good people yonder are altogether engrossed by their cards and their small-talk."

Her cheeks flushed, her blue eyes lit up. She knew intuitively what was coming. Without a word she stepped with him from the open French window out into the starlit night.

What is it that the poet says about solitude, and moonlight, and youth? A dangerous combination, truly; and so Sir Everard Kingsland found standing side by side with this pale daughter of a dozen earls, under the swinging stars. But the irrevocable words were not destined to be spoken, for just then George Grosvenor, goaded to jealous desperation, stalked out through the open casement and joined them.

The big midnight moon was sailing slowly up to the zenith as Sir Everard rode home. His ride was a lonely one at all times—doubly lonely through Brithlow Wood, which shortened his journey by over a mile. But his thoughts were pleasant ones, and he hummed, as he rode, the songs Lady Louise had sung.

"Confound that muff, Grosvenor!" he thought. "If it had not been for his impertinent intrusion, the matter would have been safely settled by this time—and settled pleasantly, too, I take it; for without being a conceited noodle, I really think Lady Louise will say yes. Ah, what's this?"

For out of the starlit darkness, from amongst the trees, started up a giant black figure, and his horse was grasped by the bridle and hurled back upon his haunches. He was in the midst of the wood, midnight solitude and gloom around.

"You villain!" the young baronet dauntlessly cried, "let go my bridle-rein. Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm Dick Darkly," answered a deep, gruff voice, "and I want your heart's blood!"

"You poaching scoundrel!" exclaimed Sir Everard, quick as lightning raising his riding-whip and slashing the aggressor across the face. "Let go my horse's head!"

With a cry that was like the roar of a wild beast the man sprang back. The next instant, with a horrible oath, he had seized the young man in the grasp of a giant and torn him out of the saddle.

"I'll tear you limb from limb for that blow, by heavens!" Dick Darkly shouted. "If I hadn't meant to kill you before, I would kill you for that cut of your whip. I've waited for you, Sir Everard Kingsland! I swore revenge, and revenge I'll have. I'll kill you this night, if they hang me for it to-morrow!"

He had the strength of a dozen such men as the slender young baronet. He towered up in the weird night like a grim, black monster, with murder in his face and a devil gleaming in either eye. He held his victim in a grip of iron, from which he struggled madly to get free, whilst the horse, with a shrill neigh of terror, started off riderless.

"I swore I'd kill you, Sir Everard Kings-

land," Dick Darkly growled, "when you put my poor brother in Worrel gaol for snaring the miserable rabbits to keep his sick wife and children from starving. I swore it, and I'll keep my oath. You told your gamekeeper this very day you would lash me like a dog, and duck me after. Aha, Sir Everard! Where's the horserhip and the horse-pond now?"

"Here!" shouted the young baronet; and with a mighty effort he freed his arms, and raising the whip, slashed Dick Darkly for the second time across the face. "You murdering villain, you shall swing for this!"

With a blind roar of rage and pain, the murderer closed with his victim. They grappled and rolled over and over in each other's arms. Now the baronet was uppermost, now his assailant, in a silent, deadly struggle.

The moonlight, sitting down through the trees, saw the grim, white faces, the starting eyeballs, the blood-stained grass. Panting and speechless, the death-struggle went on; but Sir Everard was no match for the burly giant. His sight was failing him, his breath coming in choking gasps, his hands powerlessly relaxing their hold. With a savage cry, the huge poacher thrust his hand into his belt, and a long, blue-bladed knife gleamed murderously in the moon's rays.

"At last!" he panted, his face distorted with fiendish fury. "I'll have your heart's blood, as I swore I'd have it!"

He lifted the murderous knife. Sir Everard Kingsland tried to gasp one last brief prayer in that supreme moment. In another he knew that deadly blade would be up to the hilt in his heart.

"Help!" he cried, with a last wild struggle. "Help! Help! Murder!"

There was a rustling in the trees, and some one sprang out. The last word was lost in the sharp report of a pistol, and with an unearthly scream of agony, Dick Darkly dropped his knife and fell backwards on the grass.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERIOUS YOUNG MAN.

The baronet leaped to his feet, and stood face to face with his preserver. The giant trees, towering up until they seemed to pierce the sky, half shut out the moonlight, but yet Sir Everard could see that it was a slender stripling who stood before him—a slouched hat pulled far over his eyes.

"I owe you my life," he cried, grasping the youth's hand. "An instant later, and I would have been in eternity. How shall I ever thank you?"

"Don't make the attempt," replied the

lad, coolly. "It was the merest chance-work in the world that sent me here to-night."

"Don't call it chance, my boy. It was Providence sent you to save a life."

The youth laughed—a soft and silvery laugh enough, but with an unpleasant latent mockery.

"Providence! I'm afraid that great guiding Power has very little to do with my actions. However, you may be right. Providence may have wished to save your life, and was not particular as to the means. Let us look to this fellow. I hope my stray shot has not killed him outright."

They both stooped over the fallen giant. Dick Darkly lay on his face, groaning dismally—the blood pumping from his chest with every breath.

"It's an ugly-looking hole," said Sir Everard. "Two inches lower, and it would have gone straight through his heart. As it is, it will put a stop to his assassinating proclivities for awhile, I fancy. Lie still, you matchless scoundrel, whilst I try and stop this flow of blood."

He knelt beside the groaning man, and endeavoured to stanch the red gushing with his handkerchief. The youth stood by, gazing calmly on.

"What do you mean to do with him?" he asked.

"Send some of my people to take him to his home, and as soon as he is sufficiently recovered to stand his trial for attempted murder."

"For Heaven's sake, Sir Everard!" faintly moaned the wounded man.

"Ah, you audacious villain, you can supplicate now! If I let you off this time, my life would not be worth an hour's purchase. Once you were able to stand again on your rascally legs, I should be shot at like a dog from behind a hedge."

"Try me, Sir Everard—give me this chance—and you shall, I swear, never have cause to rue it."

"You swear it?" said the baronet.

"I do," replied the wounded man; "and before Heaven I will keep my word, Sir Everard Kingsland!"

"Then I give you your life," added the baronet, "and you shall hear no more of this night's work from me."

"What did he call you?" asked the boy with sudden, sharp anxiety in his tone.

"Whose life have I saved?"

"I am Sir Everard Kingsland, of Kingsland Court," the baronet answered. "And you are—who?"

The light there in that dusky woodland path

was too dim for Sir Everard to see the change that passed over the youth's face at these words. It turned to a dull, leaden white. His right hand involuntarily clutched the discharged pistol and his eyes glowed like live coals.

"Sir Everard Kingsland! he slowly repeated; "and his very voice had altered. "And I have saved your life!"

"For which Heaven be praised! It is a very pleasant world this, and I have no desire just yet to leave it. Pray tell me the name of my preserver."

He had stanchd the flow of blood, and now stood before the youth, trying to see his hidden face. But the boyish head drooped.

"Never mind my name; it is of no consequence who I am. I have a long journey before me. I am very weary and footsore, and it is time I was on my way."

"Weary and footsore!" repeated the baronet. "Nay, then all the more need we should not part. Come home with me and rest—to-night, at least. I owe you a heavy debt, and I should like to pay a little of it."

"You owe me nothing!" His eyes gleamed under his hat and his teeth clenched as he spoke. "Nothing, Sir Everard Kingsland! Let us say good-bye. I must reach Worrel by sunrise."

"And so you shall. The fleetest horse in my stables shall carry you. But come to Kingsland and rest for the night. If you will not accept my thanks, accept at least the shelter of my roof."

The boy seemed to hesitate.

The baronet took advantage of that momentary hesitation and drew his arm through his own. There was not a prouder man in wide England, but this unknown lad had saved his life, and Sir Everard was only two-and-twenty, and full of generous impulses.

"Come," he said, "don't be obstinate. You own to being footsore and weary. Kingsland is very near, and a night's rest will do you good."

The hidden face flushed, the hidden eyes glowed, but the voice that answered was calm.

"Thanks. I accept your kind hospitality, Sir Everard, on two conditions."

"On any conditions you choose, my friend. What are they?"

"That no one shall know it but yourself, and that I may depart before daybreak."

"I dislike that last condition very much, but it must be as you say. Sleep in safety, most mysterious youth. No one shall know you are under my roof, and I will come and wake you

myself at the first peep of day. Will that do?"

"Admirably. You are very kind to take all this trouble for a nameless tramp, Sir Everard."

"Am I? Even when the nameless tramp saved my life?"—yet Sir Everard winced a little whilst saying it. "And that reminds me we must hasten, if yonder fallen man is to recover from his wound. His condition is not an enviable one at this moment."

"How did it happen?" the boy asked.

And the young baronet repeated the story of Dick Darkly's provocation and vow of revenge.

As he concluded, they passed through the stately gates, up the majestic sweep of drive, to the imposing old mansion.

"Home!" Sir Everard said, gaily. "Solitude and darkness reign, you see. The family have long since retired, and we can pass to our respective dormitories unseen and unheard."

The boy looked up with his brilliant glowing eyes. There was more than mere curiosity in that look—the bright, fierce eyes actually seemed to glare in the moonlight. But he did not speak. In silence he followed Sir Everard in, up the noble marble staircase, along richly carpeted, softly-lighted corridors, and into a stately chamber.

"You will sleep here," Sir Everard said. "My room is near, and I am a light sleeper. To-morrow morning at five I will rouse you. Until then, adieu, and pleasant dreams."

He swung out of the room and closed the door, and not once had he seen the face of his guest. That guest stood in the centre of the handsome chamber, and gazed around with glittering eyes.

"At last," he hissed between his set white teeth—"at last, after two years' weary waiting! At last, oh, my mother, the time has come for me to keep my vow!"

He raised one arm with a tragic gesture, removed the slouched hat, and stood uncovered in the tranquil half-light.

The face was wonderfully handsome, of gipsy darkness, and the eyes shone like black stars; but a scarlet handkerchief was bound tightly round his head, and concealed every vestige of hair. With a slow smile creeping round his mouth, the boy took his handkerchief off.

"To-morrow he will come and call me, but to-morrow I shall not leave Kingsland Court. No, my dear young baronet, I have not saved your life for nothing! I shall have the honour of remaining your guest for some time."

All dressed as he was, he flung himself on the bed, and in ten minutes was fast asleep.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS SYBILLA SILVER.

Meantime Sir Everard had aroused his valet and a brace of tall footmen, and despatched them to the aid of the wounded man in the wood. And then he sought his own chamber, and, after an hour or two of aimless tossing, dropped into an uneasy sleep.

And sleeping, Sir Everard had a singular dream. He was walking through Brithlow Wood, with Lady Louise on his arm, the moonlight sifting through the tall trees as he had seen it last. Suddenly, with a rustle and a hiss, a huge green serpent glided out, reared itself up, and glared at them with eyes of deadly menace. And somehow, though he had not yet seen the lad's face, he knew the hissing serpent and the preserver of his life were one and the same. With horrible hisses, the monster encircled him. Its fetid breath was in his face, its deadly fangs ready to strike his death-blow, and with a suffocating cry, Sir Everard awoke from his nightmare, and started up in bed.

The cold perspiration stood on his brow, and the first little pink cloud of dawn was rosy in the east.

"Good heavens, such a night of horrors, waking and sleeping! A most ungrateful dream, truly! It is time I awoke my unknown preserver."

He sprang out of bed, dressed hastily, and made his way to the chamber of his guest. He rapped at the door—once, twice, thrice, louder each time, but still no answer. Then he turned the handle and went in. But on the very threshold he recoiled as if he had been struck.

The mysterious youth lay fast asleep upon the bed, dressed as he had left him, with the exception of the slouched hat and the red cotton handkerchief. *They* lay on the carpet and over the pillows, and over the coarse velveteen jacket streamed such a wealth of blue-black hair as the baronet in all his life had never beheld before. It reached beyond the sleeper's waist in its rich, luxurious abundance.

"Powers above!" Sir Everard gasped, in his utter amazement, "what can this mean?"

He advanced with bated breath, bent over and gazed at the sleeper's face. One look, and his flashing first suspicion was a certainty. This dark, youthful, faultlessly beautiful face was a woman's face—that flowing cloud of blue-black hair was a woman's hair. A girl in velveteen shooting jacket and pantaloons, handsome as some dusky Indian princess, lay asleep before him.

Sir Everard Kingsland, in the last stage of

bewilderment and amaze, retreated precipitately and shut the door.

"And to think," he said to himself in the passage, when he could catch his breath, "that my mysterious young man of Brithlow Wood should turn out to be a mysterious young woman! And a dead shot too, by Jove!"

The instant the chamber door closed, the mysterious young man raised himself on his elbow, very wide awake, his handsome face lit with a triumphant smile.

"So," he said, "step the second has been taken, and Sir Everard has discovered the sex of his preserver. As he is too delicate to disturb a slumbering lady in disguise, the slumbering lady must disturb *him*."

He—or rather she—leaped lightly off the bed, picked up the scarlet bandanna, twisted scientifically the abundant black hair, bound it up with the handkerchief, and crushed down over all the slouched hat. Then, with the handsome face overshadowed, and all expression screwed out of it, she opened the door, and saw, as she expected, the young baronet in the passage.

He stopped at once at sight of her. He had been walking up and down, with an exceedingly surprised and perplexed face; and now he stood with his great, Saxon-blue eyes piercingly fixed upon the young person in velveteen, whose jacket and trousers told one story, and whose streaming dark hair told quite another.

"It is past sunrise, Sir Everard," his preserver began, with a reproachful glance, "and you have broken your promise. You said you would awake me."

"I beg your pardon," retorted Sir Everard, quietly. "I have broken no promise. I came to your room twenty minutes ago to arouse you, as I said I would. I knocked thrice, and received no reply. Then I entered. You must excuse me for doing so. How was I to know I was entertaining angels unaware?"

With a low cry of consternation, his hearer's hands flew up and covered his face, to hide the blushes that were not there.

"Your red handkerchief and hat do you good service in your masquerade, mademoiselle. I confess I never should suspect a lady in that suit of velveteen."

With a sudden, theatrical *abandon*, the "lady in velveteen" flung herself on her knees at his feet.

"Forgive me!" she cried, holding up her clasped hands. "Have pity on me! Don't reveal my secret, for Heaven's sake!"

"Forgive you!" repeated Sir Everard, hastily, endeavouring to raise her. He had a true masculine hatred of scenes, and the present seemed a little overdone. "What have I

to forgive? Pray get up. There is no reason why you should kneel and supplicate pity from me. You are welcome to don inexpressibles to the last day of your life, as far as I am concerned."

He raised her imperatively. Her head drooped in womanly confusion, and, hiding her face, she sobbed.

"What must you think? How dreadful it must look! But, oh, Sir Everard, if you only knew—if you only knew!"

"I should like to know, I confess. Come here in this window recess and tell me, won't you? The servants will be about presently, and will disturb us. Come, look up, and don't cry so. Tell me who you are."

"I am Sybilla Silver, and I have run away from home, and I will die sooner than go back."

She looked up with a passionate outbreak, and Sir Everard, for the first time, saw the luminous splendour of a pair of flashing Spanish eyes.

"I shall not send you back, depend upon it. Why did you run away, Miss Silver?"

He smiled a little as he said it, the feminine appellation sounded so incongruous addressed to this slender lad in velvet. Again the flashing brightness of the splendid Spanish eyes dazzled him.

"Do you really wish to know?" she asked, earnestly. "Oh, Sir Everard Kingsland, will you indeed be my friend?"

"Your true and faithful friend, my poor girl," he answered, moved by the piteous appeal. "Surely I could hardly be less to one who so bravely saved my life."

"Ah, that was nothing. I lay no claim on *that*. Serve me as you would serve any friendless girl in distress, and you are brave, and generous, and noble, I know."

The young baronet smiled.

"You flatter me Miss Silver. Suppose you cease complimenting, and begin at the beginning. Who are your friends?—and why did you leave them?—and where have you run away from?"

"From Yorkshire, Sir Everard—yes, all the way from Yorkshire, in this disguise. Ah, it seems very bold and unwomanly, does it not? But my uncle was such a tyrant, and I had no appeal. I am an orphan, Sir Everard—my father and mother have been dead since my earliest recollection, and this uncle, my sole earthly relative, has been my guardian and tormentor.

"I cannot tell you how cruelly he has treated me. I have been immured in a desolate old country house, without friends or companions of my own age or sex, and left to drag on a

useless and aimless life. My poor father left me a scant inheritance, but, such as it is, my uncle set his greedy heart upon adding it to his own. To do this, he determined upon marrying me to his only son.

"My cousin William was his father over again—meaner, more cruel, and crafty, and cold-blooded, if possible, and utterly abhorred by me. I would sooner have died ten thousand deaths than marry such a sordid, hateful wretch! But marry him I surely must have done, if I remained in their power. So I fled. With inconceivable trouble and manœuvring, I obtained this suit of clothes. If I fled undisguised, I knew I should certainly be pursued, overtaken, and brought back.

"In the dead of night I opened my chamber window and made my escape. I took a loaded pistol of my uncle's with me—I knew how to use it—and I felt safe with such a protector. My old nurse lived in Plymouth with her daughter, and to her I meant to go. I had a little money with me, and made good my escape. My disguise saved me from suspicion and insult. Last night, on my way to Worrel, I heard you cry for help, and my pistol stood me in good stead for the first time. There, Sir Everard, you know all. I hate and despise myself for the dress I wear, but surely there is some excuse to be made for me."

The Spanish eyes, swimming in tears, were raised imploringly to his; and Sir Everard was two-and-twenty, and very susceptible to a woman's tears.

"Very much excuse, my poor girl!" he said, warmly. "I am the last on earth to blame you for flying from a detested marriage. But there is no need to wear this disguise longer, surely?"

"No, no need; but I have had no opportunity of changing it. And if I do not succeed in finding my nurse at Plymouth, I don't know what will become of me."

"Have you not her address?"

"No; neither have I heard from her in a long, long time. She lived in Plymouth years ago with her married daughter, but we never corresponded; and whether she is there now, or whether indeed she is living at all, I do not know. I caught at the hope as the drowning catch at straws."

Sir Everard paused thoughtfully a moment. She had removed the ugly hat and handkerchief whilst talking, and the luxuriant hair streamed in a glossy mass of curls and ripples over her shoulders.

He looked at her in that thoughtful pause. How beautiful she was, in her dark glowing girlhood! How friendless, how desolate in the world! All that was chivalric, and generous,

and romantic, and impulsively youthful in the handsome baronet awoke.

"It would be the wildest of wild-goose chases, then," he said, "knowing as little of your nurse's whereabouts as you do, to seek her in Plymouth now. Write first, or advertise in the local papers. If she is still resident there, that will fetch her."

"Write!—advertise!" Sybilla Silver repeated, with unspeakable mournfulness. "From whence, Sir Everard?"

"From here," answered the baronet, decidedly. "You shall not leave here until you find your friends! And you shall not wear this odious disguise an hour longer. Go back to your chamber and wait."

He rose abruptly and left her; and Miss Sybilla Silver, with a steely glitter in her handsome black eyes and a disagreeably derisive smile about her pretty mouth, got up and went back to her room.

"What an egregious muff he is!" she said to herself, contemptuously. "There is no cleverness in fooling such an imbecile as that! I am going on velvet for so far. I only hope my lady may be as easily dealt with as my lady's only son."

My lady's only son went straight to a door down the corridor, quite at the other extremity, and opened it. As he expected, at that early hour he found it deserted. It was a lady's dressing-room evidently, and a miracle of plate-glass, and gilding, and cedar closets, and prettiness. Laid out, all ready for wear, was a lady's morning toilette, complete, and without more ado, Sir Everard confiscated the whole concern. At the white cashmere robe alone he cavilled.

"This is too gay. I must find a more sober garment. All the maid-servants in this house would recognize this immediately."

He went to one of the closets, searched there, and presently reappeared with a black silk dress. Rolling all up in a heap, he started at once with his prize, laughing inwardly at the figure he cut.

"If Lady Louise saw me now, or my lady mother either, for that matter! What will Mildred and her maid say, I wonder, when they find burglars have been at work, and her maternal toilet stolen?"

He bore his bundle straight to the chamber of his pretty runaway, and tapped at the door. It was discreetly opened an inch or two.

"Here are some clothes. When you are dressed, come out. 'I will wait in the passage.'"

"Thank you," Miss Silver's soft voice said—she had a peculiarly soft, sweet voice—and then the door closed and Sir Everard was left to wait.

The young person whose adventures were so highly sensational doffed her velveteens, and donned the dainty garments of Miss Mildred Kingsland. She examined the fine, snow-white linen with a curious smile.

All the things were beautifully made and embroidered, marked with the initials "M. K.," and adorned with the Kingsland crest. And, strange to say, all, the black silk robe included, fitted her wonderfully. The dress was rather tight, but she managed to fasten it.

"Miss Mildred Kingsland must be tall and slender, since her dress fits me so well. Ah, what a change even a black silk dress makes in one's appearance! He admired me—I saw he did—in jacket and pantaloons. What will he do, then, in this? Will he fall in love with me, I wonder?"

She laughed softly to herself at the thought. She was busy brushing out the luxuriant tresses and twisting the long, glossy curls round her taper fingers.

One parting peep in the glass, and she opened the door and stepped out before Sir Everard Kingsland, a dazzling vision of beauty.

He stood and gazed. Could he believe his eyes? Was this superb-looking woman with the flowing curls, the dark, bright beauty and imperial mien, the lad in velvet who had shot the poacher last night? Why, Cleopatra might have looked like that in the height of her regal splendour, or Queen Semiramis, in the glorious days that were gone.

"This is indeed a transformation!" he said, coming forward. "Your disguise was perfect. I should never have known you for the youth I parted from ten minutes ago."

"I can never thank you sufficiently, Sir Everard. Ah, if you knew how I abhorred myself in that hateful disguise! Nothing earthly will ever induce me to put it on again."

"I trust not," he said, gravely; "let us hope it may never be necessary. You are safe here, Miss Silver, from the tyranny of your uncle and cousin. The friendless and the unprotected shall never be turned away from Kingsland Court."

She took his hand and lifted it to her lips, and once more the luminous eyes were swimming in tears. The action was theatrically graceful, but to Sir Everard very real, and his fair face reddened like a girl's.

"I would thank you if I could, Sir Everard," the sweet voice murmured; "but you overpower me. Your goodness is beyond thanks."

A footstep on the marble stair made itself unpleasantly audible at this interesting crisis. Miss Silver dropped the baronet's hand with

a wild instinct of flight in her great black eyes.

"Return to your room," Sir Everard whispered. "Lock the door, and remain there until I apprise my mother of your presence here, and prepare her to receive you. I don't want these prying servants to find you here."

She vanished like a flash.

Sir Everard walked down stairs, and passed his own valet sleepily ascending.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Everard," said the valet, in a tone of respectful reproach; "but we were all very anxious about you. Sir Galahad came galloping home riderless, and"—

"That will do, Edward. You did not disturb Lady Kingsland?"

"No, Sir Everard."

Sir Everard passed abruptly on, and sought the stables at once. Sir Galahad was there, undergoing his morning grooming, and greeted his master with a loud neigh of delight.

The young baronet dawdled away the lagging morning hours, smoking cigars under the waving trees, and waiting for the time when my lady should be visible. She rarely rose before noon, but to-day was one of the rare occasions, and she deigned to get up at nine. Sir Everard flung away his last cigar, and went bounding up the grand staircase, three steps at a time.

Lady Kingsland sat breakfasting in her boudoir with her daughter—a charming little bijou of a room, all filigree work, and fluted walls, and delicious little Greuzia paintings, and flowers, and perfume—and Lady Kingsland, in an exquisitely becoming *robe de matin*, at five-and-fifty, looked fair and handsome, and scarce middle-aged yet. Time that deals so gallantly with these blonde beauties had just thinned the fair hair at the parting, and planted dainty crows'-feet about the patrician mouth, but left the white skin unwrinkled, and no thread of silver under the pretty Parisian lace cap.

Mildred Kingsland, opposite her mother, scarcely bore her years so gracefully. She looked pale and *passé*, and worn and faded, and seemed likely to remain Miss Kingsland to the end of her days now. She had had her little romance, poor girl, and it had been incontinently nipped in the bud by imperious mamma, and she had dutifully yielded, with the pain sharp in her heart all the same. But he was poor, and Mildred was weak, and so good-bye had been said for ever, and Lady Kingsland's only daughter glided uncomplainingly into old-maidenhood.

My lady glanced over her shoulder, and greeted her son with a brightly-loving smile. He was her darling and her pride—her earthly

idol!—the last of the Kingslands. What was a pale-faced, insipid girl like Mildred beside this "curled darling of the gods"?

"Good morning, Everard. I thought you would have done Mildred and myself the honour of breakfasting with us. Perhaps it is not too late yet. May I offer you a cup of chocolate?"

"Not at all too late, mother mine. I accept your offer and your chocolate on the spot. Milly, good morning! You are white as your dress!"

"Oh, fair, pale Margaret,
Oh, rare, pale Margaret!"

"What is the matter?"

"Mildred is fading away to a shadow of late," his mother said. "I must take her to the seaside for change."

"When?" asked Sir Everard.

"Let me see. Ah, when you are married, I think. What time did you come home last night?—and how is Lady Louise?"

"Lady Louise is very well. My good mother" — half-laughing — "are you very anxious for a daughter-in-law at Kingsland to quarrel with?"

"I shall not quarrel with Lady Louise."

"Then it must be Lord Carteret's daughter, and no other?"

"Everard," his mother said, earnestly, "you know I have set my heart on seeing Lady Louise your wife. And she loves you, I know. And you, my darling Everard—you will not disappoint me?"

"I should be an ungrateful wretch if I did. Rest easy, *ma mère*—Lady Louise shall become Lady Louise Kingsland, or the fault shall not be mine. I believe I should have asked the momentous little question last night but for that interloper, George Grosvenor."

"Ah, jealous, of course! He is always *de trop*, that great, stupid George," my lady said, complacently. "And was the dinner-party agreeable?—and what time did you get home?"

"The dinner-party was delightful, and I came home shortly after midnight. What time Sir Galahad arrived I can't say—half an hour before I did, at least."

Lady Kingsland looked inquiringly.

"Did you not ride Sir Galahad?"

"Yes, until I was torn from the saddle. My dear mother, I met with an adventure last night. Indeed, you might never have seen your precious son again."

"Everard!"

"Quite true. But for the direct interposition of Providence, in the shape of a handsome lad in velveteen, who shot my assailant, I would be lying now in Brithlow Wood yonder as dead as any Kingsland in the family vault."

And then, whilst Lady Kingsland, very, very pale in her alarm, gazed at him breathlessly, Sir Everard related his thrilling midnight adventure and its cause.

"Good heavens!" my lady cried, starting from her seat, and clasping him convulsively in her arms. "Oh, to think what might have happened! My boy—my boy!"

The young man laughed, and kissed her.

"Very true, mother; but a miss is as good as a mile, you know. Poetical justice befell my assailant; and here I am, safe and sound, sipping chocolate. Another cup, if you please, Milly."

"And the preserver of your life, Everard—where is he?"

"Up stairs, waiting, like Patience on a monument; and, by the same token, fasting all this time. But it isn't a HE, *ma mère*—it's a SHE."

"What?"

Sir Everard laughed.

"Such a mystified face, mother! Oh, it's highly sensational and melodramatic, I promise you. Sit down and hear the sequel."

CHAPTER X.

A SHAFT FROM CUPID'S QUIVER.

Eloquently and persuasively Sir Everard proceeded to tell his mother and sister Miss Sybilla Silver's extraordinary story, and Lady Kingsland was profoundly shocked.

"Disguised herself in men's clothes! My dear Everard, what a dreadful creature she must be!"

"Not at all dreadful, mother. She is as sensitive and womanly a young lady as ever I saw in my life. And," pursued the baronet, modestly, "she's a very pretty girl too."

Lady Kingsland looked suspiciously at her son. She highly disapproved of pretty girls where he was concerned; but the handsome face was frank and open as the day, rather laughing at her than otherwise.

"Now don't be suspicious, Lady Kingsland. I'm not going to fall in love with Miss Sybilla Silver, I give you my word and honour. She saved my life, remember. May I not fetch her here?"

"What! in men's clothes, and before your sister? Everard, how dare you!"

Sir Everard broke into a peal of boyish laughter that made the room ring.

"I don't believe she's in men's clothes!" exclaimed Mildred, suddenly. "Honorine told me robbers must have been in my dressing-room last night—half my things were taken away. I understand it now; Everard was the robber."

The young man got up and walked towards the door.

"I am going for her, mother. Remember she is friendless, and that she saved your son's life."

He quitted the room with the last word. That claim, he knew, was one his devoted mother, with all her imperious pride, would never repudiate.

"Oh," she said, lying back in her chair, pale and faint, "to think what might have happened!"

As she spoke her son re-entered the room, and by his side a young lady—so stately, so majestic in her dark beauty, that involuntarily the mother and daughter arose.

"My mother, this young lady saved my life. Try and thank her for me. Lady Kingsland—Miss Silver."

Surely some subtle power of fascination invested this dark daughter of the earth. The liquid, dark eyes lifted themselves in mute appeal to the great lady's face, and then the proudest woman in England opened her arms with a sudden impulse, and took the outcast to her bosom.

"I can never thank you enough," she murmured. "The service you have rendered me is beyond all words."

An hour later, Sybilla went slowly back to her room. She had breakfasted *tête-à-tête* with my lady and her daughter, while Sir Everard, in scarlet coat and cords and tops, had mounted his horse, and ridden off to Lady Louise and the fox-hunt—and to his fate, though he knew it not. And in that hour the subtle fascination had wrought its spell.

"Really, Mildred," my lady said, "a most delightful young person, truly. Do you know, if she does not succeed in finding her friends, I should like to retain her as companion?"

In her own room, Sybilla Silver stood before the glass, and smiled back at her own image. An evil, sardonic smile it was, that Lucifer himself might have worn.

"So, my lady!" she said. "You walk into the trap with your eyes open, too—you, who are old enough to know better. My handsome face, and black eyes, and smooth tongue, stand me in their usual good stead. And I saved Sir Everard Kingsland's life! Poor fools! A thousand times better for you all if I had let that midnight assassin kill him like a dog!"

* * * * *

It was ten o'clock, and the hunting-party were ready to start from Lord Carteret's, when Sir Everard Kingsland joined them, looking handsome and happy as a young prince in his very becoming hunting costume.

The meet was at Brithlow Brake, and half a dozen gentlemen, who had dropped in on their way to the cover, were grouped picturesquely around the ladies.

Of course, the young baronet's first look was for Lady Louise—he scarce glanced at the rest. She was just being assisted into the saddle by the devoted George Grosvenor, but she turned to Sir Everard with the sweet smile he had learned to know so well, and graciously held out her gauntleted hand.

"Once more," she said, "almost late! Laggard! I shall quarrel with you one of these days, if you do not learn to be more punctual."

"You will never have to reproach me again," he said, gallantly. "Had I known you would have honoured my absence by a thought, you should not have had to reproach me now."

"Very pretty, indeed, Sir Everard. But don't waste your time paying compliments this morning. Thanks, Mr. Grosvenor—that will do. For whom are you looking, Sir Everard? Lady Carteret? Oh, she is going to see as much of the fun as she can from the carriage, with some other ladies. Miss Hunsden and myself are the only ones who intend to ride. By the way, I hope Sir Galahad will uphold his master's reputation to-day. He must do his very best, or Whirlwind will beat him."

At that instant a red-coated young gentleman joined them, in an evident state of excitement.

"I say, Kingsland, who's that girl on the splendid roan? She sits superbly, and is strikingly handsome besides. I beg your pardon, Lady Louise! Perhaps you know?"

Lady Louise laughed—her soft, malicious laugh.

"Lord Ernest Strathmore is excited on the subject! That young lady is Miss Harriet Hunsden. Don't lose your head, my lord. One gentleman possesses her heart, and all the rest of you may sigh in vain."

"Indeed! And who is the fortunate possessor?"

"Captain Hunsden, her father. There he is by her side now."

At the first mention of her name, Sir Everard Kingsland had turned sharply round, and beheld—his fate. But he did not know it. Who was to tell him that that tall, imperial-looking girl, with the gold-brown hair, the creamy skin, the great grey eyes, the slender shape, was to overturn the whole scheme of the universe for him—to drive him blind and mad with the frenzy men call love? He only saw a handsome, spirited-looking girl, sitting a magnificent roan horse as easily as if it had been an

arm-chair, and talking animatedly to a stalwart, soldierly man, with white hair and moustache.

As he glanced away from his prolonged stare, he met the piercing gaze of Lady Louise's turquoise-blue eyes.

"*Et tu, Brute!*" she cried, gaily. "Oh, my prophetic soul! Did I not warn you, Sir Everard? Did I not forget that the dashing damsel in the dark-blue habit would play the mischief with your fox-hunting heart? No, no; never deny the soft impeachment! But I tell you, as I told Lord Ernest, it is of no use. She is but seventeen, and 'twer young to marry yet."

Before Sir Everard could retort, the cry of "Here they come!" proclaimed the arrival of the hounds, and as the huntsman passed he cast rather surly glances at the two mounted ladies, with pleasant inward visions of their heading the fox, and being in the way.

Shortly after this the hounds were put into the gorse, and the red-coats began to move out of the field into the lane, Sir Everard and Lady Louise with them.

A loud "Tally-ho!" rang through the air, and presently the hounds came with a rushing roar over a fence.

"There he goes!" cried a chorus of voices, as the fox flew over the ground.

And a few seconds later Whirlwind tore by, like its namesake, with the handsome girl in the saddle upright as a dart. Away went Sir Galahad, helter-skelter, side by side with the roan. Lady Louise and her sedate nag were left hopelessly behind.

On, and on, and on, like the wind, Whirlwind flew over the fences, and Miss Hunsden sat in her saddle like a queen on her throne, never swerving.

The young baronet, even in the fierce heat of the chase, could see the beautiful, glowing face, the flashing grey eyes, and the lances of light flickering in the gold-brown hair. Side by side, Sir Galahad and Whirlwind galloped until four or five fields had been crossed.

Then came a change—a tall, stiff fence of heavy thorn rose ahead, which no one was mad enough to face, for a wide ditch was on the near side, and Heaven knows what on the other.

The baronet pulled his bay violently to the right, and looked to see the dashing huntress follow. But, no! The blood of Miss Hunsden and the "red roan steed" was up, and straight they went at that awful place, scorning to swerve an inch.

"For Heaven's sake, Miss Hunsden," cried the voice of Lord Ernest Strathmore, "don't try that!"

But he might as well have spoken to the cataract of Niagara. With a tremendous rush, Whirlwind charged the place. There was a crash—another—and a plunge downward!

Sir Everard turned sick with horror; but the magnificent Whirlwind settled into his stride, and the girl recovered her balance in the very instant, and was away again like the wind.

"Splendidly done, by Jove!" cried Lord Ernest, his eyes ablaze. "I never saw a lady ride before like that in all my life."

Sir Everard dashed on. His horse was on his mettle; but do what he would, the slender, girlish figure and superb roan kept ahead. Whirlwind took hedges and ditches before him, disdainingly to turn to the right or left, and, after a sharp run of an hour, Miss Hunsden had the glory and happiness of being one of the successful few up at the finish—in time to see the fox held over the huntsman's head, with the hounds hanging expectant round.

Every eye turned upon the heroine of the hour, and loud were the canticles chanted in her honour. The master of the hounds himself rode up, all aglow with admiration.

"Miss Hunsden," he said, "I never in all my life saw a lady ride as you rode to-day. There are not half a dozen men in Devonshire who would have faced the fence as you did. I sincerely hope you will frequently honour our field by your presence and matchless riding."

Miss Hunsden bowed easily, and smiled, showing a row of dazzling teeth.

And then her father came up, his soldierly old face aglow.

"Harrie, my dear, I am proud of you! You led us all to-day. I wouldn't have taken that nasty place myself, and I didn't believe even Whirlwind could do it."

Then George Grosvenor, and Lord Ernest, and the rest of the men crowded round, and compliments poured in.

Sir Everard held himself aloof—disgusted—nauseated—or so he told himself.

"Such an unwomanly exhibition—such a daring, masculine leap! And see how she sits and smiles on those empty-headed fox-hunters, like an Amazonian queen in her court! How different from Lady Louise! And yet, good heavens, how royally beautiful she is!"

"Alone, Kingsland?" exclaimed a voice at his elbow; and glancing around, he saw Lord Carteret. "What do you think of our pretty Di Vernon? You don't often see a lady ride like that. Why don't you pay your devoirs? Don't know her—eh? Come along; I'll present you."

Sir Everard's heart gave a sudden plunge,

quite unaccountably. Without a word, he rode up to where the grey-eyed enchantress held her magic circle.

"Harrie, my dear," said the elderly nobleman, "I bring a worshipper who hovers aloof and gazes in speechless admiration. Let me present my young friend. Sir Everard Kingsland—Miss Hunsden."

Sir Everard took off his hat and bent to his saddle-bow. The clear grey eyes and sparkling smile-lit face turned their entrancing brightness upon him, and again his heart went in tumultuous plunges against his ribs.

"Sir Everard Kingsland!" cried Captain Hunsden, cordially. "Son of my old friend, Sir Jasper, I'll be sworn! My dear sir, how are you? I knew your father well. We were at Rugby together, and sworn companions. Harrie, this is the son of my oldest friend."

"My father's friends are all mine."

The voice was clear and sweet as the beaming eyes. She held out her hand with a frank grace, and Sir Everard took it, its light touch thrilling to the core of his heart. She was only a madcap, a hoyden, a youthful Amazon who took hideous leaps and rode after hounds; but, for all that, she was beautiful as a Greek goddess, and—his time had come!

Sir Everard Kingsland rode back to Carteret Park beside the Indian officer and his daughter as a man might ride in a trance. Surely within an hour the whole world had been changed! He rode on air instead of solid soil, and the sunshine of heaven was not half so brilliant as Harriet Hunsden's smile!

"Confess now, Sir Everard," she said, laughingly, cutting short the compliments he tried to utter, "you were shocked and scandalized. I saw it in your face. Oh, don't deny it, and don't tell polite fibs! I *always* shock people, and rather enjoy it than otherwise."

"Harriet!" her father said, reprovingly. "She is a spoiled madcap, Sir Everard, and I am afraid the fault is mine. She has been everywhere with me in her seventeen years of life—freezing amid the snows of Canada, and grilling alive under the broiling sun of India. And the result is—what you see."

"The result is—perfection."

"Papa," Miss Hunsden said, turning her sparkling face to her father, "for Sir Everard's sake, pray change the subject. If you talk of me, he will feel in duty bound to pay compliments; and really, after such a fast run, it is too much to expect of any man. There! I see Lady Louise across the brook yonder. I will leave you gentlemen to cultivate one another. *Allons, messieurs!*"

One fleeting, backward glance of the be-

witching face, a saucy smile and wave of the hand, and Whirlwind had leaped across the brook and ambled on beside the sober steed of Lady Louise.

"Every one has been talking of your riding, Miss Hunsden," Lady Louise said. "I am nearly beside myself with envy. Lord Ernest Strathmore says you are the most graceful equestrienne he ever saw."

"His lordship is very good. I wish I could return the compliment, but his chestnut balked shamefully, and came home dead beat!"

Lord Ernest was within hearing distance of the clear, girlish voice, but he only laughed good-naturedly.

"As you are strong, be merciful, Miss Hunsden. We can't all perform miracles on horseback, you know. I came an awful cropper, at that ugly hedge, to be sure, and your red horse went over me like a blaze of lightning! You owe me some atonement, and—of course you are going to the ball to-night?"

"Of course! I like balls even better than hunting."

"And she dances better than she rides," put in her father, coming up.

"She is perfection in everything she undertakes, I am certain," Lord Ernest said, bowing profoundly; "and for that atonement I speak of, Miss Hunsden, I claim the first waltz."

They rode together to Carteret Park. Sir Everard had the privilege of assisting her to dismount.

"You must be fatigued, Miss Hunsden," he said. "With a ball in prospective, after your hard gallop, I should recommend a long rest."

Miss Hunsden laughed gaily.

"Sir Everard, I don't know the meaning of that word 'fatigue.' I never was tired in my life, and I am ready for the ball to-night, and a steeple-chase to-morrow, if you like."

She tripped off as she spoke with a mischievous glance. She wanted to shock him, and she succeeded.

"Poor girl!" he thought, with a little shudder, as she slowly turned homewards, "she is really dreadful. She never had a mother to look after her, I suppose, and wandering over the world with her father has made her a perfect savage. How refreshing is Lady Louise's repose of manner in comparison! She is truly to be pitied—so exceedingly beautiful as she is, too."

Sir Everard certainly was very sorry for that hoydenish Miss Hunsden. He thought of her, while dressing for dinner, to the utter exclusion of everything else, and he talked of her all through that meal, "more in sorrow than in anger."

Sybilla Silver, quite like one of the family already, made the fourth at the table, and listened with greedy ears and eager black eyes.

"You ought to call, mother," the baronet said—"you and Mildred. Common politeness requires it. Captain Hunsden was my father's most intimate friend, and this wild girl stands sadly in need of some matronly adviser."

"I remember Captain Hunsden," Lady Kingsland said, thoughtfully, "and I remember this girl, too, when she was a child of three or four years. He was a very handsome man, I recollect, and he married away in Canada or the United States. There was some mystery about that marriage—something vague and unpleasant—no one knew what. She ought to be pretty, this daughter."

"Pretty!" Sir Everard exclaimed. "She is beautiful as an angel! I never saw such eyes or such a smile in the whole course of my life!"

"Indeed!" his mother said, coldly—"indeed! Not even excepting Lady Louise's?"

Sir Everard blushed like a schoolboy.

"Oh, Lady Louise is altogether different. I didn't mean any comparison. But you will see her to-night at Lady Carteret's ball, and can judge for yourself. She is a mere child—sixteen or seventeen, I believe."

"And Lady Louise is five-and-twenty," said Mildred, with awful accuracy.

"She does not look twenty!" exclaimed my lady, sharply. "There are few young ladies nowadays half so elegant and graceful as Lady Louise."

Miss Silver's large black eyes glided from one to the other with a sinister smile in their shining depths. Her soft voice broke in at this jarring juncture, and sweetly turned the disturbed current of conversation; and Sir Everard understood, and gave her a grateful glance.

The young baronet had gone to many balls in his lifetime, but never had he been so painfully particular before. He drove Edward, his valet, to the verge of madness with his whims, and left off at last in sheer desperation and altogether dissatisfied with the result.

"I look like a guy, I know," he muttered, angrily; "and that pert little Hunsden is just the sort of girl to make satirical comments on a man if his necktie is awry or his hair unbecoming. Not that I care what *she* says, but one hates to feel he is a laughing-stock."

The ball-room was brilliant with lights, and music, and flowers, and diamonds, and beautiful faces, and magnificent toilets, when the Kingsland party entered.

Lady Carteret, in velvet robes, stood re-

ceiving her guests. Lady Louise, with white azaleas in her hair and dress, stood stately and graceful, looking from tip to toe what she was—the descendant of a race of “highly-wed, highly-fed, highly-bred” aristocrats.

But at neither of them Sir Everard glanced twice. His eyes wandered round, and lit at last on a divinity in a cloud of misty white, crowned with dark-green ivy leaves, a-glitter with diamond drops.

There she stood, her white shoulders rising exquisitely out of the foamy lace, leaning in a careless, graceful way against a marble column, holding her bouquet, and looking like some lovely fairy queen. You could not imagine *her* the dashing hutchess of the morning.

Whilst he gazed, Lord Ernest Strathmore came up, said something, and whirled her off in the waltz. Away they flew. Lord Ernest waltzed to perfection, and she—a Frenchwoman or a fairy only could float like that!

A fierce, jealous pang gripped his heart; a second, and they were out of sight. Sir Everard roused himself from his trance, and went up to his hostess to pay his respects.

“Ah,” Lady Carteret said, a little spitefully, “the spell is broken at last! There was no mistaking that look, Sir Everard! My dear Lady Kingsland”—laughing, but malicious still—“take care of your son. I’m afraid he’s going to fall in love.”

CHAPTER XI.

“FOR LOVE WILL STILL BE LORD OF ALL.”

My Lady Carteret’s ball was a brilliant success, and, fairest where all were fair, Harrie Hunsden shone down competitors. As she floated down the long ball-room, on the arm of Lord Ernest, light as a swimming-sprite, a hundred admiring male eyes followed, and a hundred fair patrician bosoms throbbled with bitterest envy.

“The little Hunsden is in full feather to-night,” lisped George Grosvenor, coming up with his adored Lady Louise on his arm. “There is nothing half so beautiful in the room, with one exception”—a sidelong bow to his fair companion. “And only look at Kingsland! Oh, he’s done for, to a dead certainty.”

Sir Everard started up rather confusedly. He had been leaning against a pillar, gazing after the divinity in the ivy crown, with his heart in his eyes, and Lady Louise was the last person in the universe he had been thinking of. With a guilty feeling of shame, he turned and met the icily formal bow of Earl Carteret’s daughter.

“We are losing our waltz, Mr. Grosvenor,” she said, frigidly, “and we are disturbing Sir Everard Kingsland. The Guards Waltz is a great deal too delightful to be missed.”

“I fancied the first waltz was to be mine, Lady Louise,” Sir Everard said, with an awful sense of guilt.

Lady Louise’s blue eyes flashed fire. Had looks been lightning, the glance would have slain him.

“With Miss Hunsden, perhaps—certainly not with me. Come, Mr. Grosvenor.”

It was the first spiteful shaft Lady Louise had ever condescended to launch, and she bit her lip angrily an instant after, as George whirled her away.

“Idiot that I am!” she thought, “to show him I can stoop to be piqued, to show him I can be jealous, to show him I care for him like this! He will get to fancy I love him next, and he—he has had neither eyes nor ears for any one else since he saw Harriet Hunsden this morning.”

A sharp, quick pain pierced the proud breast of the earl’s daughter, for she *did* love him, and she knew it—as much as it was in her lymphatic nature to love at all. And with the knowledge her woman’s anger rose.

“I will never forgive him—never!” her white teeth clenched. “The dastard—the traitor—to play the devoted to me, and then desert me at the first sight of a madcap on horseback! I will never stoop to say one civil word to him again.”

Lady Louise kept her vow. Sir Everard, penitent and remorseful, strove to make his presence in vain.

Lord Carteret’s daughter listened icily, sent barbed shafts tipped with poison from her tongue in reply, danced frigidly with him once, and steadily refused to dance again.

She let George Grosvenor, poor moth, flutter into the flame and singe his wings worse than ever. With him she went to supper, and one of the white azaleas shone triumphant in his black coat, as a reward of merit.

Sir Everard gave it up at last, and went in search of Miss Hunsden, and was accepted by that young lady on the spot for a redowa.

“I thought you would have asked me ages ago,” said Harrie, with delicious frankness. “I saw you were a good dancer, and that is more than I can say for any other gentleman present, except Lord Ernest. Ah, Lord Ernest can waltz! It is the height of ball-room bliss to be his partner. But you stayed away to quarrel with Lady Louise, I suppose?”

“I have not been quarrelling with Lady Louise,” replied Sir Everard, feeling guiltily conscious, though, all the same.

"No? It looked like it, then. She snubs you in the most merciless manner, and you—oh, what a penitent face you wore the last time you approached her! I thought she was a great deal too uplifted for flirting; but what do you call *that* with George Grosvenor?"

"George Grosvenor is a very old friend. Here is our redowa, Miss Hunsden. Never mind Lady Louise."

His arm encircled her waist, and away they flew. Sir Everard could dance as well as Lord Ernest, and quite as many admiring eyes followed him and the bright belle of the ball. Mr. Grosvenor pulled his tawny moustache with inward delight.

"Handsome couple—eh, Carteret?" he said, to his host; "it's an evident case of spoons there. Well, the boy is only two-and-twenty, and at that age we all lose our heads easily."

Two angry red spots, quite foreign to her usual complexion, burned on Lady Louise's fair cheeks. She turned abruptly away, and left the gentlemen.

"Harrie is pretty enough to excuse an older man losing his head," Lord Carteret answered, looking after his sister a little uneasily; "but it would not suit Lady Kingsland's book at all. The Hunsden is poorer than a church-mouse, and though of one of our best old county families, the pedigree bears no proportion to my lady's pride. A duke's daughter, in her estimation, would be none too good for her darling son. See, she is frowning ominously in the distance now!"

Mr. Grosvenor smiled satirically.

"She is a wonderful woman, my lady, but I fancy she is matched at last. If Kingsland sets his heart on this latest fancy, all the powers of earth and Hades will not move him, for verily he comes of a dogged and determined race. Do you recollect that little affair of Miss Kingsland and poor Douglas of the—? My lady put a stop to that, and he was shot, poor fellow, at Balaclava. But the son and heir is quite another story. *Apropos*, I must ask little Mildred to dance. *Adio*, Carteret!"

How noiseless falls the foot of Time
That only treads on flowers!

The ball whirled on—the hours went by like bright, swift flashes, and from the moment of the redowa, to Sir Everard Kingsland, it was one brief, intoxicating dream of delirium. My Lady Kingsland's maternal frowns, my lady Louise's imperial scorn—all were forgotten. She was a madcap and a hoyden—a wild, hair-brained, fox-hunting Amazon—all that was shocking and unwomanly; but, at the same time, all that was bright, beautiful, entrancing, irresistible. His golden-haired ideal, with the

azure eyes and seraphic smile, soft of voice, timid of manner, a cross between an angel and Tennyson's "Maud," was forgotten, and this grey-eyed enchantress, robed in white, crowned with ivy, dancing desperately the whole night long, set brain and heart reeling in the mad tarantula of love.

It was over at last—the grey and dismal dawn of the November morning stole chilly through the curtained casements. A half-blown rose from Miss Hunsden's bouquet bloomed in Sir Everard's button-hole, and it was Sir Everard's blissful privilege to fold Miss Hunsden's furred mantle round those pearly shoulders.

Other beauties might droop and pale in the ghostly morning light, but after seven hours' consecutive dancing, Miss Hunsden's roses were unwilted. The bleak, morning breeze blew her perfumed hair across his eyes as she leaned on his arm and he handed her into the carriage.

"We shall expect to see you at Hunsden Hall," the Indian officer said, heartily. "Your father's son, Sir Everard, will ever be a most welcome guest."

"Yes," said Harrie, leaning forward coquettishly, "Come by-and-by, and inquire how my health is after dancing all night. Etiquette demands that much, and I'm a great stickler for etiquette."

"Sir Everard would never have discovered it, I am certain, dear, if you had not told him."

Sir Everard's blue eyes looked eloquently into the sparkling grey ones; his handsome happy face was all aglow.

"A thousand thanks! I shall only be too delighted to avail myself of both invitations. Miss Hunsden, remember—you said by-and-by, and by-and-by I shall come."

Sir Everard went home to Kingsland Court as he never had gone home before. The whole world was *couleur de rose*—the bleak November morning, and the desolate high road—sweeter, brighter, than the Elysian Fields!

How beautiful she was, how the starry eyes had flashed, how the rosy lips had smiled! Half the men at the ball were madly in love with her, he knew; and she—she had danced twice with him, all night, for once with any one else.

It was a very silent drive. Lady Kingsland sat back among her wraps in displeased silence; Mildred never talked much, and the young baronet was lost in blissful ecstasy a great deal too deep for words. He could not even see his mother was angry—he never gave one poor thought to Lady Louise. Immersed in the sublime egotism of youth and love, the

whole world was bounded by Harriet Hunsden.

Sybilla Silver was up and waiting in Lady Kingsland's dressing-room. A bright fire, and a cheery cup of tea, and a smiling face greeted her fagged ladyship with pleasant surprise.

"Really, Miss Silver," she said, languidly, "this is very thoughtful of you! Where is my maid?"

"Asleep, my lady. Pray let me fulfil her duties this once. I hope you enjoyed the ball."

"I never enjoyed a ball less in my life!" my lady replied, sharply. "Pray make haste. I am in no mood for talking."

Sybilla's swift, deft fingers disrobed the moody lady, loosened the elaborate structure of hair, brushed it out, and prepared my lady for bed; and all the while she sat frowning angrily at the fire.

"There was a young lady at the ball—a Miss Hunsden," she said, at last, breaking out in spite of herself—"and the exhibition she made was perfectly disgraceful! Bold, odious minx! Miss Silver, if you see my son before I get up to-day, tell him I wish particularly for his company at breakfast."

"Yes, my lady," Miss Silver said, docilely; and my lady did not see the smile that flickered and faded with the words.

She understood it all perfectly. Sir Everard had broken from the maternal apron-string, had deserted the standard of Lady Louise, and gone over to this "bold, odious" Miss Hunsden.

Sybilla dutifully delivered the message the first time she met the baronet. A groom was holding Sir Galahad, and his master was just vaulting into the saddle. He turned away impatiently from the dark face and sweet voice.

"It is impossible this morning," he said, sharply. "Tell Lady Kingsland I shall have the pleasure of meeting her at dinner."

He rode away as he spoke, with the sudden consciousness that it was the first time he and that devoted mother had ever clashed. Thinking of her, he thought of her favourite.

"She wants to read me a tirade, I suppose, about her favourite, Lady Louise," he said to himself, rather sullenly. "They would badger me into marrying her if they could. I never cared two straws for the daughter of Earl Carteret. She is frightfully *passée*, and she's three years older than I am. I am glad I did not commit myself irrevocably to please my mother. A man should marry only to please himself."

Sir Everard reached Hunsden Hall in time for luncheon. The old place looked deserted and ruinous. The half-pay Indian officer's poverty was visible everywhere—in the time-

worn furniture, the neglected grounds, the empty stables, and the meagre staff of old-time servants. But the wealthy baronet surveyed the impoverished scene with a look of almost exultation.

"Captain Hunsden is so poor that he will be glad to marry his daughter to the first rich man who asks her. The Hunsden estate is strictly entailed to the next male heir, he has only his pay, and she will be left literally a beggar at his death."

His eyes flashed triumphantly at the thought. Harriet Hunsden stood in the sunshine on the lawn, with half a score of dogs, big and little, bouncing around her—more lovely it seemed, to the infatuated young baronet, in her simple home dress, than ever. No trace of yesterday's fatiguing hunt, or last night's fatiguing dancing, was visible in that radiant face.

But just at that instant Captain Hunsden advanced to meet him, with Lord Ernest Strathmore by his side.

"What brings that idiot here?" Sir Everard thought, his face darkening. "How absurdly early he must have ridden over!"

He turned to Miss Hunsden and uttered the polite commonplaces proper for the occasion, feeling more at a loss for words than ever before in his life.

"I told you I never was fatigued," the young lady said, playing with her dogs, and sublimely at her ease. "I am ready for a second hunt to-day, and a ball to-night, and a picnic the day after. I should have been a boy. It's perfectly absurd my being a ridiculous girl, when I feel as if I could lead a forlorn hope, or, like Alexander, conquer a world. Come to luncheon."

"Conquer a world—come to luncheon! A pretty brace of subjects!" said her father.

"Miss Hunsden is quite capable of conquering a world, without having been born anything so horrid as a boy," said Lord Ernest. "There are bloodless conquests, wherein the conquerors of the world are conquered themselves."

The baronet scowled. Miss Hunsden retorted saucily. She and Lord Ernest kept up a brilliant wordy war.

He sat like a silent fool—like an imbecile, he said to himself, glowering malignantly. He was madly in love and he was furiously jealous. What business had this ginger-whiskered young lordling interloping here! And how disgustingly self-assured and at home he was! He tried to talk to the captain, but it was a miserable failure, he knew, with his ears strained listening to *them*.

It was a relief when a servant entered with the morning's letters.

"They are late in reaching us," Captain

Hunsden said. "I like my letters with my breakfast."

"Any for me, papa?" Harriet asked, breaking off in her flirtation.

"One—from your governess in Paris, I think—and half a dozen for me."

He glanced carelessly at the superscriptions as he laid them down. But as he took the last he uttered a low cry; his face turned livid; he stared at it as if it had turned into a death's head in his hand.

The two young men looked at him aghast. His daughter rose up, very pale.

"Oh, papa!"—

She stopped in a sort of breathless affright.

Captain Hunsden rose up. He made no apology. He walked to a window and tore open his letter with passionate haste.

His daughter still stood—pale, breathless.

Suddenly, with a hoarse, dreadful cry, he flung the letter from him, staggered blindly, and fell down in a fit.

A girl's shrill scream pierced the air. She sprang forward, thrust the letter into her bosom, knelt beside her father, and lifted his head. His face was dark purple—the blood oozed in trickling streams from his mouth and nostrils.

All was confusion. They bore him to his room; a servant was despatched in mad haste for a doctor. Harriet bent over him, white as death. The two young men waited—pale, alarmed, and confounded.

It was an hour before the doctor came; another before he left the sick man's room. As he departed, Harriet Hunsden glided into the apartment where the young men waited, white as a spirit.

"He is out of danger; he is asleep. Pray leave us now. To-morrow he will be himself again."

It was quite evident she was used to these attacks. The young men bowed respectfully and departed—saluted each other coldly, as rivals do salute, and rode off in opposite directions.

Sir Everard was in little humour, as he went slowly and moodily homeward, for his mother's lecture. He was insanely jealous of Lord Ernest, and he was amazed and confounded by the mystery of the letter.

"There is some secret in Captain Hunsden's life," he thought, "and his daughter shares it. Some secret, perhaps, of shame and disgrace—some bar sinister in their shield; and, good heavens! I am mad enough to love her—I, a Kingsland of Kingsland, whose name and escutcheon are without a blot! What do I know of her antecedents or his? My mother spoke of some mystery in his past life, and

there is a look of settled gloom in his face that nothing seems able to remove. Lord Ernest Strathmore, too—he must come to complicate matters; and he is infatuated with the girl—any one can see that. She is the most glorious creature the sun shines on, and if I don't ask her to be my wife, she will be my Lady Strathmore before the new moon wanes."

CHAPTER XII.

MISS HUNSDEN SAYS NO.

Sir Everard found his mother looking very angry; but she nursed her wrath throughout dinner, and it was not until they were in the drawing-room alone that she commenced. He was so moodily *distract* all through the meal that he never saw the volcano smouldering, and the Vesuvian eruption took him altogether by surprise. Sybilla Silver saw the coming storm, and pricked up her ears in delightful expectation of a rousing scene; and quiet Mildred saw it, and shrank sensitively. But both were spared the "tempest in a teapot." The hailstorm of angry words clattered about the baronet's ears alone.

"Your conduct has been disgraceful," Lady Kingsland passionately cried—"unworthy of a man of honour! You pay Lady Louise every attention; you make love to her in the most *prononcée* manner; and at the eleventh hour you desert her for this forward little barbarian."

Sir Everard opened his large blue Saxon eyes in cool surprise.

"My dear mother, you mistake," he said, with perfect *sang froid*. "Lady Louise made love to me."

"Everard!"

Her voice absolutely choked with rage.

"It sounds conceited and foppish, I know," pursued the young gentleman; "but you force me to it in self-defence. I never made love to Lady Louise, as Lady Louise can tell you, if you choose to ask."

"You never asked her in so many words, perhaps, to be your wife. Short of that, you have left nothing undone."

Sir Everard thought of the dinner party, of the moonlit balcony, of George Grosvenor, and was guiltily silent.

"Providence must have sent him," he thought, "to save me in the last supreme moment. Pledged to Lady Louise, and madly in love with Harriet Hunsden, I should blow out my brains before sunset."

"You are silent," pursued his mother. "Your guilty conscience will not let you answer. You told me yourself, only two days

ago, that but for George Grosvenor you would have asked her to be your wife."

"Quite true," responded her son; "but who knows what a day may bring forth? Two days ago I was willing to marry Lady Louise—to ask her, at least. Now, not all the wealth of the Indies, not the crown of the world, could tempt me!"

"Good heavens!" cried my lady, goaded to the end of her patience, "only hear him! Do you mean to tell me, you absurd, mad-headed boy, that in one day you have fallen hopelessly in love with this hare-brained, masculine Harriet Hunsden?"

Sir Everard's fair face flushed angry red.

"I tell you nothing of the sort; the inference is your own. But this I will say—I would rather marry Harriet Hunsden than any other woman under heaven. She may be wild, as you say—harebrained perhaps (whatever that means)—but then you will recollect that she is but seventeen. When she is five-and-twenty she may be as sedate even as your model and favourite. If I prefer a girl of seventeen to a mature woman of twenty-five, even you can hardly blame me. Let Lady Louise take George Grosvenor. He is in love with her, which I never was; and he has an earl's coronet in prospective, which I have not. As for me, I have done with this subject at once and for ever. Even to you, my mother, I cannot delegate my choice of a wife."

"I will never receive Harriet Hunsden!" Lady Kingsland passionately cried.

"Perhaps you never will have the opportunity. She may prefer to become mistress of Strathmore Castle. Lord Ernest is her most devoted adorer. I have not asked her yet. The chances are a thousand to one she will refuse when I do."

His mother laughed scornfully, but her eyes were ablaze.

"You mean to ask her, then?"

"Most assuredly."

She laughed again—a bitter, mirthless laugh.

"We go fast, my friend! And you have hardly known this divinity four-and-twenty hours."

"Love is not a plant of slow growth. Like Jonah's gourd, it springs up, fully matured, in an hour."

"Does it? My son is better versed in amatory floriculture than I am. But before you ask Miss Hunsden to become Lady Kingsland, had you not better inquire *who her mother was?*"

The baronet thought of the letter, and turned very pale.

"Her mother! I do not understand. What of her mother?"

"Only this"—Lady Kingsland arose as she spoke, her face deathly white, her pale eyes glittering—"the mother is a myth and a mystery! Report says Captain Hunsden was married in America. No one knows where, and America is a wide place. No one ever saw the wife; no one ever heard Miss Hunsden speak of her mother; no one ever heard of that mother's death. I leave Sir Everard Kingsland to draw his own inferences."

She swept from the room with a mighty rustle of silk. A dark figure crouching on the rug, with its ear to the keyhole, barely had time to whisk behind a tall Indian cabinet as the door opened.

It was Miss Sybilla Silver, who was already asserting her prerogative as amateur lady's-maid.

My lady shut herself up in her own room for the remainder of the evening, too angry and mortified for words to tell. It was the first quarrel she and her idolized son ever had, and the disappointment of all her ambitious hopes left her miserable enough.

But scarcely so miserable as Sir Everard. To be hopelessly in love on such short notice was bad enough; to have the dread of a rejection hanging over him was worse; but to have this dark mystery looming horribly in the horizon was worst of all.

His mother's insinuations alone would not have disturbed him; but those insinuations, taken in unison with Captain Hunsden's mysterious illness of the morning, drove him nearly wild.

"And I dare not even ask," he thought, "or set my doubts at rest. Any inquiry from me would be impertinent, before proposing; and after proposing, they would be too late. But one thing I am certain of—if I lose Harrie Hunsden, I shall go mad."

Of course this angry ruffling of love's current at the very outset only strengthened the stream. Opposition left the young man tenfold more doggedly in love than ever, and he strode up and down the drawing-room like a melodramatic hero, grinding his teeth and glaring at vacancy, and longing with a fierce impotency to run away with Harrie Hunsden to-morrow, and never ask a question about her mother, and never see his own again.

Whilst he tore up and down like a caged tiger, the door softly opened, and his sister looked in.

"Alone, Everard?" she said, timidly. "I thought mamma was with you."

"Mamma has gone to her room in a blessed temper," answered her brother, savagely.

"Come in, Milly, and help me in this horrible scrape, if you can."

"Is it something about—Miss Hunsden?"—hesitatingly. "I thought mamma looked displeased at dinner."

"Displeased!" exclaimed the young man, with a short laugh. "That is a mild way of putting it. Mamma is inclined to play the Grand Mogul in my case, as she did with you and poor Fred Douglas."

"Oh, brother!"

Mildred Kingsland put out both hands and shrank, as if he had struck her.

"Forgive me, Milly! I'm a brute, and you're an angel, if there ever was one on earth! But I've been hectoring and lectured, and badgered and bothered, until I am fairly beside myself. She wants me to marry Lady Louise, and I *won't* marry Lady Louise if she was the last woman alive! Milly, who was Miss Hunsden's mother?"

The murder was out. He stood still, glaring fierce interrogation at his sister.

"Her mother? I'm sure I don't know. I was quite a little girl when Captain Hunsden was here before, and Harrie was a pretty little curly-haired fairy of three years. I remember her so well! Captain Hunsden dined here once or twice, and I recollect perfectly how gloomy and morose his manner was. I was quite frightened of him. You were at school then, you know."

"I know"—impatiently. "I wish to Heaven I had not been! Boy as I was, I should have learned something. Did you never hear the cause of the captain's abnormal gloom?"

"No; papa and mamma knew nothing, and Captain Hunsden kept his own secrets. They had heard of his marriage some four or five years before—a low marriage, it was rumoured—an actress, or something equally objectionable. Little Harrie knew nothing—at three years it was hardly likely; but she never prattled of her mother as children of that age usually do. There is some mystery about Captain Hunsden's wife, Everard, and—pardon me—if you *like* Miss Hunsden, you ought to have it cleared up."

Everard laughed—a harsh, strident laugh.

"If I *like* Miss Hunsden, my dear little Milly! Am I to go to Hunsden Hall, and say to its master, 'Look here, Captain Hunsden, give me proofs of your marriage—tell me all about your mysterious wife. You have a very handsome, high-spirited daughter; but before I commit myself by falling in love with her, I want to make sure there was no tarnish on the late Mrs. Hunsden's wedding-ring.' Captain Harold Hunsden is a proud man. How do you think he will like the style of *that*?"

Mildred stood silent, looking distressed.

"I wish I had married Lady Louise a month

ago and gone out of the country!" he burst out, vehemently. "I wish I had never seen this girl! She is everything that is objectionable—a half-civilized madcap—shrouded in mystery and poverty—danced over the world in a baggage-waggon! I have quarrelled with my mother, for the first time, on her account. But I love her—I love her with all my heart—and I shall go mad or shoot myself if I don't make her my wife."

He flung himself impetuously, face downwards, on the sofa. Mildred stood pallid and scared in the middle of the floor, in the extremity of helpless distress. Once he lifted his head and looked at her.

"Go away, Milly!" he said, hoarsely. "I'm a savage to frighten you so! Leave me. I shall be better alone."

And Mildred, not knowing in the least what else to do, went.

* * * * *

Next morning, hours before Lady Kingsland was out of bed, Lady Kingsland's son was galloping over the breezy hills and golden downs. An hour's hard run, and he made straight for Hunsden Hall. The hand of fate drove him impetuously on, and he was powerless to resist.

Miss Hunsden was taking a constitutional up and down the terrace overlooking the sea with three big dogs. She turned round at Sir Everard's approach, and greeted him quite cordially. She was rather pale, but perfectly composed.

"Papa is so much better this morning," she said, "that he is coming down to breakfast. He is subject to these attacks, and they never last long. Any exciting news upsets him altogether."

"That letter contained exciting news, then?" Sir Everard could not help saying.

"I presume so. I did not read it. How placid the sea looks this morning, a-glitter in the sunlight; And yet I have been in the middle of the Atlantic when the waves ran mountains high."

But the moody young baronet was not going to talk of the sea.

"You are quite a heroine, Miss Hunsden, and a wonderful traveller for a seventeen-year-old young lady. You see I know your age; but at seventeen a young lady does not mind, I believe. How long have you been in England this time?"

He spoke with careless adroitness; Miss Hunsden answered frankly enough:

"Five months. You were abroad, I think, at the time?"

"Yes. And now you have come for good, I

hope. As if Miss Hunsden could come for anything else!"

"It all depends on papa's health," replied Harriet, quietly ignoring the compliment. "I should like to stay, I confess. I am very, very fond of England."

"Of course. As you should be of your native place"—he was firing nearer the target.

"England is not my native place," said Harriet, calmly. "I was born at Gibraltar?"

"At Gibraltar! You surprise me. Of course your mother was not a native of Gibraltar?"

His heart throbbed fast. Was he treading on forbidden ground? Would the great grey eyes flash forked lightning as he knew they could flash? No, Miss Hunsden heard the adroit question and made no sign.

"Of course not. My mother was an American—born and bred, and married in New York."

Here was an explicit statement. His pulses stood still a moment, and then went on fast and furious.

"I suppose you scarcely remember her?"

"Scarcely," the young lady repeated, drily—"since I never saw her."

"Indeed! She died, then?"

"At my birth—yes. And now, Sir Everard"—the bright, clear eyes flashed suddenly full upon him—"is the catechism almost at an end?"

He absolutely recoiled. If ever guilt was written on a human face it was written on his.

"Ah!" Miss Hunsden said, scornfully, "you thought I couldn't find you out—you thought I couldn't see your drift! Have a better opinion of my powers of penetration next time, Sir Everard. My poor father, impoverished in purse, broken in health, sensitive in spirit, chooses to hide his wounds—chooses not to wear his heart on his sleeve for the Devonshire daws to peck at—chooses never to speak of his lost wife; and lo! all the gossips of the country are agape for the news. She was an actress, was she not, Sir Everard? And when I ride across the country at the heels of the hounds it is only the spangles and glitter and theatre-glare breaking out again. I could despise it in others, but I *did* think better things of the son of my father's oldest friend. Good morning, Sir Everard."

She turned proudly away. In that instant, as she towered above him, superb in her beauty and her pride, all other earthly considerations were swept away like cobwebs. If the world had been his he would have laid it at her regal feet.

"Stay, Harriet—Miss Hunsden! Stop—for

pity's sake, stop and hear me! I have been presuming—impertinent! I have deserved your rebuke."

"You have," she said, haughtily.

"But I asked those questions because the nameless insinuations I heard drove me mad—because I love you—I worship you—with all my heart and soul!"

Like an impetuous torrent the words burst out. He actually flung himself on his knees before her, in his boyish *abandon* of his love and delirium.

"My beautiful, queenly, glorious Harriet! I love you as man never loved woman before!"

Miss Hunsden stood aghast, staring, absolutely confounded. The passionate words rained down upon her in a stunning shower.

For one instant she stood thus; then all was forgotten in her sense of the ludicrous. She leaned against a tree, and set up a shout of laughter long and clear.

"Oh, good gracious!" cried Miss Hunsden, as soon as she was able to speak. "Who ever heard the like of this? Sir Everard Kingsland, get up! I forgive you everything for this superhuman joke. I haven't had such a laugh for a month! For goodness' sake get up, and *don't* be a goose!"

The young baronet sprang to his feet, furious with mortification and rage.

"Miss Hunsden"—

"Oh, don't!" cried Harriet, in a second paroxysm—"don't make me rupture an artery! Love me?—worship me? Why, you ridiculous thing, you haven't known me two days altogether!"

He turned away without speaking a word. A choking sensation rose up in his throat, for, poor fellow, he had been terribly in earnest.

"And then you're engaged to Lady Louise. Every one says so, and I am sure it looks like it."

"I am *not* engaged to Lady Louise."

He said those words huskily, and he could say no more."

Miss Hunsden tried to look grave, but her mouth twitched. Her sense of the ludicrous overcame her sense of decorum, and again she laughed until the tears stood in her eyes.

"Oh, I shall die!"—in a faint whisper. "My sides ache. I beg your pardon, Sir Everard, but indeed I cannot help it. It is so funny."

"So I perceive. Good morning, Miss Hunsden."

"And now you are angry! Why, Sir Everard!"—catching for the first time a glimpse of his deathly-white face—"I didn't think you felt like this! Oh, I beg your pardon with all my heart for laughing. I

believe I should laugh on the scaffold. It's dreadfully vulgar, but it was born with me, I'm afraid. Did I gallop right into your heart's best affections at the fox hunt? Why, I thought I shocked you dreadfully. I know I tried to. Won't you shake hands, Sir Everard, and part friends?"

"Miss Hunsden will always find me her friend if she ever needs one. Farewell!"

Again he was turning away. He would not touch the proffered palm. He was so deathly white, and his voice shook so, that the hot tears rushed into the impetuous Harrie's eyes.

"I am so sorry!" she said, with the simple humility of a little child. "Please forgive me, Sir Everard! I know it was horrid of me to laugh; but you don't really care for me, you know. You only think you do; and I—oh, I'm only a flighty girl of seventeen, and I don't love anybody in the world but papa, and I never mean to be married—at least, not for ages to come. Do forgive me!"

He bowed low; but he would neither answer nor take her hand—he was far too deeply hurt.

Before she could speak again he was gone. A moment, and he had vaulted into the saddle and was out of sight.

"He is dreadfully angry," said Harrie, ruefully. "Oh, dear, dear—what torments men are, and what a bore falling in love is! And I liked him, too, better than any one of them, and thought we were going to be brothers-in-arms—Damon and—what's his name?—and all that sort of thing! It's of no use *my* ever hoping for a friend. I shall never have one in this lower world, for just so sure as I get to like a person, that person must go and fall in love with *me*, and then we quarrel and part. It's hard!"

And Miss Hunsden sighed deeply, and went into the house.

And Sir Everard rode home as if the fiend was after him—like a man gone mad—and flung the reins of the foaming horse to the astounded groom, and rushed up to his room and locked himself in, and declined his luncheon and his dinner, and would have blown his brains out if there had been a loaded pistol within the four walls.

And the result of it all was, that when he came down to breakfast next morning, with a white, wild face, and livid rings round his eyes, he electrified the family by his abrupt announcement:

"I start for Constantinople to-morrow. From thence I shall make a tour of the East. I may not return to England for the next three years."

CHAPTER XIII.

LYING IN BRITHLOW WOOD.

A thunderbolt falling at your feet from a cloudless summer sky must be rather astounding in its unexpectedness, but no thunderbolt ever created half the consternation Sir Everard's fierce announcement did. They looked at him and at one another with blank faces—*his* was set, rigid, ghastly.

"Going away," his mother murmured—"going to Constantinople! My dear Everard, you don't mean it?"

"Don't I?" he said, fiercely. "Don't I look as if I meant it?"

"But what has happened? Oh, Everard, what does all this mean?"

"It means, mother, that I am a mad, desperate, and reckless man; that I don't care whether I ever return to England again or not."

Lady Kingsland's own angry temper and imperious spirit began to rise. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes flashed.

"It means you are a headstrong, selfish, cruel boy! You don't care an iota what pain you inflict on others, if you are thwarted even so slightly yourself. I have indulged you from your childhood. You have never known one unsatisfied wish it was in my power to gratify—and this is my reward!"

He sat in sullen silence. He felt the reproach keenly in its simple truth; but his heart was too sore, the pain too bitter, to let him yield.

"You promise me obedience in the dearest wish of my heart," her ladyship went on, passionately, heedless, now that her fiery spirit was fairly up, of the presence of Mildred and Sybilla, "and you break that promise at the first sight of a wild young hoyden in a hunting field. It is on *her* account you frighten me to death in this heartless manner, because I refuse my consent to your consummating your own disgrace."

"My disgrace!"—his blue eyes fairly blazed. "Take care, mother!"

"Do you dare speak in that tone to *me*?" She rose up from the table, livid with passion. "I repeat it, Sir Everard Kingsland—your disgrace! Mystery shrouds this girl's birth and her father's marriage—if he ever *was* married—and where there is mystery there is guilt."

"A sweeping assertion!" the baronet said, with concentrated scorn; "but in the present instance, my good mother, a little out of place. The mystery is of your own making. The late Mrs. Hunsden was a native of New York—there she was married, and she died at her

daughter's birth. Captain Hunsden cherishes her memory too deeply to make it the town talk, hence all the country is up agape, inventing slander. I hope you are satisfied?"

Lady Kingsland stood still, gazing at him in her surprise.

"Who told you all this?" she asked.

"She who had the best right to know—the slandered woman's daughter."

"Indeed—indeed!" slowly and searchingly. "You have been talking to her, then? And your whole heart is really set on this matter, Everard!"

She came a step nearer; her voice softened; she laid one slender hand with infinite tenderness on his shoulder—this impetuous, only son was so unspeakably dear to her.

"What does it matter?" he retorted, impatiently, tossing back his bright, fair hair, his voice full of sharp inward pain. "For Heaven's sake, let me alone, mother!"

"My boy"—a little tremour in my lady's steady voice—"if you really love this wild girl so much, if your whole heart is set on her, I must withdraw my objections. I can refuse my daughter nothing. Woo Harriet Hunsden, wed her, and bring her here. I will try and receive her kindly for your sake."

Sir Everard Kingsland shook off the fair, white, caressing hand, and rose to his feet, with a harsh laugh.

"You are very good, my mother, but it is a little too late. Miss Hunsden did me the honour to refuse me yesterday."

"Refuse you!"

She recoiled as if he had struck her.

"Even so—incredible as it sounds! You see this little barbarian is not so keenly alive to the magnificent honour of an alliance with the house of Kingsland as some others are, and she said 'No' plumply when I asked her to be my wife. Not only that, but laughed in my face for my presumption."

Again that harsh, jarring laugh rang out, and with the last word he strode from the room, closing the door with an emphatic bang.

Lady Kingsland sank down in the nearest chair, perfectly overcome, and looked at her daughter. Sybilla Silver, with a strong inclination to laugh in their faces, raised her teacup, and hid a malicious smile there.

"Refused him!" my lady murmured, helplessly. "Mildred, did you hear what he said?"

"Yes, mamma," Mildred replied, in distress. "She is a very proud girl—Harrie Hunsden."

"Proud! Good heavens!" My lady sprang to her feet, goaded by the word. "The wretched little pauper! The uneducated, uncivilized, horrible little wretch! What busi-

ness has she with pride—with nothing under the sun to be proud of? Refuse my son! Oh, she must be mad, or a fool, or both! I will never forgive her as long as I live; nor him either for asking her!"

With which my lady darted out of the apartment in a towering rage, and went up to her room and fell into hysterics and the arms of her maid on the spot.

It was a day of distress at Kingsland Court—gloom and despair reigned. Lady Kingsland, shut up in her own apartments, would not be comforted, and Sir Everard, busied with his preparations, was doggedly determined to carry out his designs. Sybilla was the only one who enjoyed the situation, and she did enjoy the prevailing dismay with a keen enjoyment that seemed quite incredible.

As she stood in the front portico early in the afternoon, humming jauntily an opera tune, a servant, wearing the Hunsden livery, rode up to her, and delivered a twisted note.

"For Sir Everard," said the man; then he rode away.

Miss Silver took it, looked at it with one of her curious little smiles, thought a moment, turned, and carried it straight to my lady. My lady examined it with angry eyes.

"From Miss Hunsden!" she said, contemptuously. "She repents her hasty decision, no doubt, and sends to tell him so. Bold, designing creature! Find Sir Everard's valet, Miss Silver, and give it to him."

Miss Silver did as requested. Sir Everard was in his dressing-room, preparing for dinner, and his pale face flushed deep red as he received the note. *Did* she repent—did she recall her refusal? He tore it open and literally devoured the contents:

Dear Sir Everard,—Please forgive me! I am so sorry I laughed and made you angry, but indeed I thought you only meant it as a joke. Two days is such a little while to be acquainted before proposing, you know. Won't you come to see us again? Papa has asked for you several times. Pray pardon me! You would if you knew how penitent I am.—Yours remorsefully,

HARRIE HUNSDEN.

Hunsden Hall, Nov. 15, 18—.

He read the piteous, childish little letter over and over again, until his face glowed. It takes but a moment to lift these impetuous, impulsive people from the depths of despair to the apex of bliss. Hope planted her shining foot once more on the baronet's heart.

"I will go at once," he said, hiding away the little pink-tinted, violet-perfumed note very near his heart. "Common courtesy requires me to say farewell before I start for Constantinople. And the captain likes me, and his influence is all-powerful with her," added the

young man, somewhat inconsequently, "and who knows"——

He did not finish the mental sentence. He rapidly completed his toilet, hid his dinner-costume under a loose riding-coat, ordered his horse, and set off in hot haste.

Of course all the short cuts came into requisition. The path through Brithlow Wood was the path he took, going at full gallop. Lost in a deliciously-hopeful reverie, he was half-way through, when a hollow groan from the wayside smote his ear.

"For Heaven's sake," a faint voice called, "help a dying man!"

The baronet stared around aghast. Right before him, under the trees, lay the prostrate figure of a fallen man. To leap off his horse, to bend over him, was but the work of an instant. Judge of his dismay, when he beheld the livid, discoloured face of Captain Hunsden!

"Great Heaven! Captain Hunsden, what horrible accident is this?"

The dulled eyes of the Indian officer sought his face.

"Sir Everard," he murmured, in a thick, choking tone, "go—tell Harrie—poor Harrie"——

His voice died away.

"Were you thrown from your horse? Were you waylaid?" asked the young man, thinking of his own recent adventure.

"One of those apoplectic attacks. I was thrown. Tell Harrie"——

Again the thick, guttural accents failed.

Sir Everard raised his head, and knelt for a moment, bewildered. How should he leave him here alone whilst he searched for a conveyance?

Just then, as if sent directly by Providence, the Reverend Cyrus Green, in his light chaise, drove into the woodland path.

"Heaven be praised!" cried the baronet. "I was wondering what I should do. A dreadful accident has happened, Mr. Green. Captain Hunsden has had a fall and is very ill."

The rector got out in consternation, and bent over the prostrate man. The captain's face had turned a dull, livid hue—his eyes had closed—his breathing came hoarse and thick.

"Very ill indeed," said the clergyman, gravely; "so ill that I fear he will never be better. Let us place him in the chaise, Sir Everard. I will drive slowly, and do you ride on to Hunsden Hall to prepare his daughter for the shock."

The Indian officer was a stalwart, powerful man. It was the utmost their united strength could do to lift him into the chaise. He lay awfully corpse-like among the cushions, rigid and stark.

"Ride—ride for your life!" the rector said;

"and despatch a servant for the family doctor. I fear the result of this fall will be fatal."

He needed no second bidding; he was off like the wind. Sir Galahad sprang over the ground, and reached Hunsden in an incredibly short time. A flying figure, in wild alarm, came down the avenue to meet him.

"Oh, Sir Everard," Harrie panted, in affright, "where is papa? He left to go to Kingsland Court, and Starlight has come galloping back riderless! Something awful has happened, I know!"

He looked down upon her with eyes full of passionate love. How beautiful she looked with her pale, upraised face, her wild, affrighted eyes, her streaming hair, her clasped hands!

His man's heart burned within him. He wanted to catch her in his arms, to hold her there for ever—to shield her from all the world and all worldly sorrow.

Something of what he felt must have shone in his ardent eyes. Hers dropped, and a bright, virginal blush dyed for the first time cheek and brow. He vaulted off his horse, and stood uncovered before her.

"Dear Miss Hunsden," he said, gently, "there has been an accident. I am sorry to be the bearer of ill news; but don't be alarmed—all may yet be well."

"Papa!" she barely gasped.

"He has met with an accident—a second apoplectic fit. I found him lying in Brithlow Wood. He had fallen from his horse. Mr. Green is driving him here in his chaise. They will arrive presently. You had better have his room prepared, and I—shall I ride for your doctor myself?"

She leaned against a tree, sick and faint. He made a step towards her, but she rallied, and motioned him off.

"No," she said, "let me be! Don't go, Sir Everard—remain here. I will send a servant for the doctor. Oh, I dreaded this! I warned him when he left this afternoon, but he wanted to see you so much."

She left him and hurried into the house, despatched a man on horseback for the doctor, and prepared her father's room.

In fifteen minutes the rector's pony-chaise drove up. He, and the baronet, and the butler assisted the stricken and insensible man up to his room, and laid him upon the bed from which he was never more to rise.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CAPTAIN'S LAST NIGHT.

The twilight was falling, ghostly and grey. A long, lamentable blast worried the stripped trees, and drove the dead leaves before it.

A pale, young, crescent moon rose watery in the bleak, starless sky. Down on the shore the flood-tide beat its hoarse refrain, and in his chamber Harold Godfrey Hunsden lay dying.

They knew it—the silent watchers in that sombre room—his daughter and all. She knelt by the bedside, her face hidden—not weeping; still, tearless, stunned. Sir Everard, the doctor, the rector, silent and sad, stood around.

The dying man had been aroused to full consciousness at last. One hand feebly rested on his daughter's stricken young head, the other lay motionless on the counterpane. His dulled eyes went aimlessly wandering.

"Doctor!"

The old physician bent over him.

"How long"—he paused—"how long can I last?"

"My dear friend"—

"How long?" the Indian officer impatiently said. "Quick, the truth! How long?"

"Until to-morrow."

"Ah!"

The hand lying on Harrie's dark curls lay more heavily perhaps—that was all.

"Is there anything you wish—anything you want done—any person you would like to see?"

"Yes," the dying man answered, life suddenly leaping up in his glazing eyes—"yes. Sir Everard Kingsland."

"Sir Everard Kingsland is here."

He motioned the baronet to approach.

Sir Everard bent over him.

"Send them away," said the sick man.

"Both! I want to speak with you alone!"

Even in that supreme moment—in the awful presence of death—the lover's heart bounded at the words the dying man might say.

He delivered the message, and the rector and doctor went into the passage to wait.

"Come closer," the captain said—and the young baronet knelt by the bedside, opposite Harrie—"and tell the truth to a dying man. Harrie, my darling, are you listening?"

"Yes, papa."

She lifted her pale, young face, rigid in tearless despair.

"My own dear girl, I am going to leave a little sooner than I thought. I knew my death would be soon and sudden, but not so soon, not so awfully sudden as this!" His lips twitched spasmodically, and there was a brief pause. "I had hoped not to leave you alone and friendless in the world, penniless and unprotected. I hoped to live to see you the wife of some good man, but it is not to be. God wills for the best, my darling, and to Him I leave you."

A dry, choking sob was the girl's answer. Her eyes were burning and bright. The captain turned to the impatient, expectant young baronet.

"Sir Everard Kingsland," he said, with a painful effort, "you are the son of my old and much-valued friend, therefore I speak. My near approach to eternity lifts me above the minor considerations of time. Yesterday morning, from yonder window, I saw you on the terrace with my daughter."

The baronet grasped his hand, his face flushed, his eyes aglow. Oh, surely the hour of his reward had come!

"You made her an offer of your hand and heart?"

"Which she refused," the young man said, with a glance of unutterable reproach. "Yes, sir. And I love her with my whole heart!"

Impetuous two-and twenty! He forgot the deathbed; he forgot everything earthly, but that his bliss or despair for life was shifting in the balance. He looked across with glowing eyes.

"I thought so"—very faintly. "Why did you refuse, Harrie?"

"Oh, papa!" She covered her face with her hand, in maidenly shame, from her lover's radiant eyes. "Why are we talking of this now?"

"Because I am going to leave you, my daughter. Because I would not leave you alone. Why did you refuse Sir Everard?"

"Papa, I—I have only known him such a little while."

"And that is all? You don't dislike him, do you, my pet?"

She flushed all over. They could see "beauty's bright, transient glow" through the hiding hands.

"No-o, papa."

"And you don't like any one else better?"

"Papa, you *know* I don't."

"My own spotless darling! And you will let Sir Everard love you, and be your true and tender husband?"

"Oh, papa, *don't*!"

She flung herself down with a vehement cry; but Sir Everard turned his radiant, hopeful, impassioned face upon the Indian officer.

"For Heaven's sake, plead my cause, sir. She will listen to *you*. I love her with all my heart and soul. I shall be miserable for life without her."

"You hear, Harrie—this vehement young wooer? Make him happy—make me happy by saying yes."

She looked up with the wild glance of a stag at bay. For one moment her frantic idea was light.

"My love—my life!" Sir Everard caught both her hands across the bed, and his voice was hoarse with its concentrated emotion. "You don't know how I love you! If you refuse, I shall go mad. I will be the truest, the tenderest husband ever man was to woman."

The great grey eyes flashed from one to the other. She looked like a creature out of her reason.

"I am dying, Harrie," her father said, sadly, "and you will be all alone in this big, bad world. But if your heart says no, my own best beloved, to my old friend's son, then never hesitate to refuse. In all my life I never thwarted you. On my deathbed I will not begin."

"What shall I do?" she cried. "What shall I do?"

"Consent!" her lover whispered, deathly pale with his supreme suspense,

"Consent!" Her father's anxious eyes spoke the word eloquently.

She looked from one to the other—the dying father, the handsome, hopeful, impetuous young lover. Some faint thrill in her heart answered his. Girls like ardent lovers.

She drew her hands out of his clasp, hesitated a moment, whilst that lovely, sensitive blush came and went, then gave them suddenly back of her own accord.

He grasped them tight, with an inarticulate cry of ecstasy. For worlds he could not have spoken. The dying face looked unutterably relieved.

"That means yes, Harrie?"

"Yes, papa."

"Thank Heaven!"

He joined their hands, looking earnestly at the young man.

"She is yours, Kingsland! May God deal with you as you deal with my orphan child!"

"Amen!"

Solemnly Sir Everard Kingsland pronounced his own condemnation with the word. Awfully came back the memory of that adjuration in the terrible days to come.

"She is very young," said Captain Hunsden, after a pause—"too young to marry. You must wait a year."

"A year!"

Sir Everard repeated the word in consternation, as if it had been a century.

"Yes," said the captain, firmly; "a year is not too long, and she will only be eighteen then. Let her return to her old *pension* in Paris; she sadly needs the help of a finishing school, my poor little girl. My will is made—the little I leave will suffice for her wants. Mr. Green is her guardian—he understands my wishes. Oh, my lad"—with an eloquent,

fatherly cry—"you will be very good to my friendless little Harrie. She will have but you in the wide world!"

"I swear it, Captain Hunsden! It will be my bliss and my honour to make her my happy wife."

"I believe you. And now go—go both, and leave me alone, for I am very tired."

Sir Everard arose, but Harrie grasped her father's cold hand in terror.

"No, no, papa! I will not leave you. Let me stay. I will be very quiet—I shall not disturb you."

"As you like, my dear. She will call you, Kingsland, by-and-by."

The young man left the room. Then Harriet lifted a pale, reproachful face to her father.

"Papa, how could you?"

"My dear, you are not sorry? You will love this young man very dearly, and he loves you."

"But his mother, Lady Kingsland, detests me." And with a sudden uprearing of the proud little head, a sudden flash of the imperious grey eyes, "I want to enter no man's house unwelcome!"

"My dear—don't be hasty! How do you know Lady Kingsland detests you? *That* is impossible, I think. She will be a kind mother to my little motherless girl. Ah, pitiful heaven, *that* agony is to come yet."

A spasm of pain convulsed his features—his brows knit, his eyes gleamed.

"Harrie," he said, hoarsely, grasping her hands, "I have a secret to tell you—a horrible secret of guilt and disgrace! It has blighted my life—blasted every hope—turned the whole world into a black and festering mass of corruption. And, oh, worst of all, *you* must hear it—*your* life must be darkened too! But not until the grave is closed over me! My child, look here!"

He drew out, with a painful effort, something from beneath his pillow and banded it to her. It was a letter, addressed to herself, and tightly sealed.

"My secret is there," he whispered—"the secret it would blister my lips to tell you. When you are safe with Madame Beaufort in Paris, open and read this—not before. You promise, Harrie?"

"Anything, papa—everything." She hid it away in her bosom. "And now try to sleep; you are talking a great deal too much."

"Sing for me, then."

She obeyed the strange request—he had always loved to hear her sing. She commenced a plaintive little song, and before it was finished he was asleep.

All night long she watched by his bedside. Now he slept, now he woke up fitfully, now he fell into a lethargic repose. The doctor and Sir Everard kept watch in an adjoining chamber within sight of that drooping, girlish form.

Once in the small hours the sick man looked at her clearly, and spoke aloud:

"Wake me at day-dawn, Harrie."

"Yes, papa."

And then he awoke again. The slow hours dragged away—morning was near. She walked to the window, drew the curtain and looked out. Dimly the pearly light was creeping over the sky, lighting the purple, sleeping sea, brightening and brightening with every passing second.

She would not disobey him. She left the window and bent over the bed. How still he lay!

"Papa," she said, kissing him softly, "day is dawning."

But the captain never moved nor spoke. And then Harriet Hunsden knew the everlasting day had dawned for him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DEAD MAN'S SECRET.

It was a very stately ceremonial that which passed through the gates of Hunsden Hall, to lay Harold Godfrey Hunsden's ashes with those of many scores of Hunsdens who had gone before.

The heir-at-law—an impoverished London man-about-town—was there in sables and sweeping hat-band, exulting inwardly that the old captain had gone at last, and "the king had got his own again."

Sir Everard Kingsland was there, conspicuous and interesting in his new capacity of betrothed to the dead man's daughter. And the dead man's daughter herself, in trailing crape and sables, deathly pale and still, was likewise there, cold and rigid almost as the corpse itself.

For she had never shed a tear since that awful moment when, with a wild, wailing cry of orphanage, she had flung herself down on the dead breast, as the new day dawned.

Pale, tearless, rigid, she sat beside that ghastly clay, stunned, benumbed; with all the keen after-agony of loneliness and sorrow to come. She had loved her soldier-father with an entire and intense love, and he had gone from her so awfully, so suddenly, that she sat dazed under the blow.

The day of the funeral was one of ghostly gloom. The November wind swept icily over the sea with a dreary wail of winter; the cold sea beat its melancholy drip, drip; sky, and

earth, and sea were all blurred and blotched in a clammy mist.

White and wild, Harriet Hunsden hung on her lover's arm, whilst the Rev. Cyrus Green solemnly read the touching burial service, and Harold Hunsden was laid to sleep the everlasting sleep.

And then, through wailing wind and driving rain, she was going back to the desolate old home—oh, so horribly desolate now. She looked at her father's empty chamber, at his vacant chair, at his forsaken bed. Her face worked. With a long, anguished cry, she flung herself on her lover's breast, and wept the rushing, passionate tears of seventeen—wept wildly and long the impetuous, blessed tears that keep youthful hearts from breaking.

He held her there as reverently, as tenderly as that dead father might have done, letting her cry her fill, smoothing the glossy hair, kissing the slender hands, calling her by names never to be forgotten whilst one pulse of life should beat.

"My darling, my darling—my bride, my wife!"

She lifted her face at last, and looked at him as she never had looked at mortal man before. In that moment he had his infinite reward. She loved him, as only these strong-hearted, passionate women can love—once and for ever!

"Love me, Everard!" she whispered, holding him close. "I have no one in the world now but you."

* * * * *

That night Harriet Hunsden left the old home for ever. The Rev. Cyrus drove her to the rectory in the rainy twilight, and still her lover sat by her side, as it was his blissful privilege to sit. She clung to him now, in her new desolation, as she might never have learned to cling in happier times.

The rector's wife received the young girl with open arms, and embraced her with motherly heartiness.

"My poor, pale darling!" she said, kissing the cold cheeks. "You must stay with us until your lost roses come blooming back."

But Harriet shook her head.

"I will go to France at once, please," she said, mournfully. "Madame Beaufort was always good to me, and it was *his* last wish."

Her voice choked—she turned away her head.

"It shall be as you wish, my dear. But who is to take you?"

"Mrs. Hilliard, and, I think, Sir Everard Kingsland."

Mrs. Hilliard had been housekeeper at Hunsden Hall, and was a distant relative of the

family. Under the new dynasty she was leaving, and had proffered her services to escort her young mistress to Paris.

The Rev. Cyrus, who hated crossing the Channel, had closed with the offer at once, and Sir Everard was to play protector.

One week Miss Hunsden remained at the rectory, fortunately so busied by her preparations for departure that no time was left for brooding over her bereavement.

And then, in spite of that great trouble, there was a sweet, new-born bliss flooding her heart. How good he was to her—her handsome young lover—how solicitous, how tender, how devoted! She could lay her head shyly on his shoulder in these calm twilights, and nestle down in his arms, and feel that life held something unutterably sweet and blissful for her still.

As for Everard, he absolutely lived at the rectory. He rode home every night, and he mostly breakfasted at the Court, but to all intents and purposes he dwelt at the parsonage.

"Where the treasure is there will the heart be also;" and my lady, now that things were settled and the journey to Constantinople postponed indefinitely, had sunk into a state of sulky displeasure, and was satirical and scornful, and contemptuous and stately, and altogether exquisitely disagreeable.

Lady Louise had left Devonshire, and gone back to shine brilliantly in London society once more.

Miss Hunsden went to France with the portly old housekeeper and the devoted young baronet. Madame Beaufort received her ex-pupil with French *effusion*.

"Ah, my angel—so pale, so sad, so beautiful! I am distracted at the appearance! But we will restore you. The change, the associations—all will be well in time."

The lonely young creature clung to her lover with passionate *abandon*. It was their first separation since her father's death.

"Don't go back just yet, Everard," she implored. "Let me get used to being alone. When you are with me I am content, but when you go, and I am all alone among these strangers!"

Her falling tears, her clinging arms, pleaded for her more eloquently than words.

But he needed no pleading—he loved her, entirely, devotedly. He promised anything—everything! He would remain in Paris the whole year of probation, if she wished, that he might see her at least every week.

She let him go at last, and stole away in the dusky gloaming to her allotted little room. She locked the door, sat down by the table, laid her

face on her folded arms, and wet them with her fast-falling tears.

"I loved him so," she thought—"my precious father! Oh, it was hard to let him go!"

She cried until she could literally cry no longer. Then she arose. It was quite dark now, and she lit her lamp.

"I will read his letter," she said to herself—"the letter he left for me. I will learn this terrible secret that blighted his life."

There was her writing-case on the table. She opened it with a little bright key attached to her watch guard, and took out the letter. She looked sadly at the superscription a moment, then reverently opened it, and began to read:

"It will be like his voice speaking to me from the grave," she thought. "My own devoted father!"

Half an hour passed. The letter was long and closely written, and the girl read it slowly from beginning to end.

With the first page, every trace of colour had slowly faded from her face; her eyes dilated, her form grew rigid as she sat. But she steadily read on; she finished it at last.

It dropped in her lap. She sat there, staring straight before her, with an awful, fixed, vacant stare. Then she arose slowly, mechanically placed it in the writing-case, relocked it, put her hand to her head confusedly, and turned with a bewildered look.

Her face flushed dark red; the room was reeling, the walls rocking dizzily. She made a step forward, with both hands blindly outstretched, and fell headlong to the floor.

Next morning, Sir Everard Kingsland, descending to his hotel breakfast, found a sealed note beside his plate. He opened it, and saw it was from the Directress of the *Pensionnat des Demoiselles*.

Monsieur,—It is with regret I inform you Mdlle. Hunsden is very ill. When you left her last evening, she ascended to her room at once. An hour after, sitting in an apartment underneath, I heard a heavy fall. I ran up at once. Mademoiselle lay on the floor in a swoon. I rang the bell; I raised her; I sent for the doctor. It was a very long swoon—it was very difficult to restore her. Mademoiselle was very ill all night—out of herself—delirious. The doctor fears for the brain. Ah mon Dieu! It is very sad—it is deplorable! We all weep for the poor Mdlle. Hunsden. I am, monsieur, with profoundest sentiments of sorrow and pity,

MARIE JUSTINE CELESTE BEAUFORT.

The young baronet waited for no breakfast. He seized his hat, tore out of the hotel, sprang into a *fiacre*, and was whirled at once to the *pension*.

Madame came to him to the parlour, her lace handkerchief to her eyes. Mademoiselle was

very ill. Monsieur could not see her, of course, but he must not despair.

Dr. Pinule had hopes. She was so young, so strong; but the shock of her father's death must have been preying on her mind. Madame's sympathy was inexpressible.

Harriet lay ill for many days—delirious often, murmuring things pitifully small, calling on her father, on her lover—sometimes on her horses and dogs. Madame and her household tended her with unremitting care. The physician was skilful, and life won the battle. But it was a weary time before they let her descend to the parlour to see that impatient lover of hers, who, half-mad with suspense and anxiety, haunted the house like a ghost.

It was very near Christmas, and there was snow on the ground, when she came slowly down one evening to see him. He sat alone, in the prim *salon*, where the porcelain stove stood, with its handful of fire, looking gloomily out at the feathery flakes whirling through the leaden twilight. He turned round as she glided in, so unlike herself, so like a spirit, that his heart stood still.

"My love—my love!"

It was all he could say. He took her in his arms, so worn, so wasted, so sad—wan as the fluttering snow without. All his man's heart overflowed with infinite love and pity as he held that frail form in his strong clasp.

"Dear Everard, I have been so ill and so lonely. I wanted you so much!"

And then she sighed—wearily, heavily—and laid her head on his shoulder, and was very still. He drew her to him, as if he never would let her go again.

"If I only could be with you always, my darling! It is cruel to keep us apart for a year."

"It was poor papa's wish, Everard. Ah, poor, poor papa!"

The unutterable compassion, the despairing sorrow of that cry—he could not understand it. He was inclined to be a little jealous of that deathless love. He wanted that heart to hold no image but his own.

Presently madame came in, and there were lights, and bustle, and separation. Mdlle. Hunsden must not remain too long, must not excite herself. Monsieur must go away, and come again to-morrow.

"I will let her see you every day, poor home-sick child, until she is well enough to go into the *classe* and commence her studies. Then, not so often. But monsieur will be gone long before that?"

"No," Sir Everard said, distinctly; "I remain in Paris for the winter. I trust to madame's kind heart to permit me to see Miss Hunsden often."

"Often! Ah, *mon dieu*, how you English are impetuous! So—how do you call him?—unreasonable! Monsieur may see mademoiselle in the *salon* every Saturday afternoon—not oftener."

Monsieur pleaded. Madame was inexorable. It was the rule of the school, and as unalterable as the laws of Draco. Harrie herself endorsed it.

"It is better so, Everard. I want to study—heaven knows I need it!—and your frequent visits would distract me. Let once a week suffice."

Sir Everard yielded to the inevitable with the best grace possible. He took his leave, raising Harriet's hand to his lips, and looking reproachfully at madame for standing by. But madame was a very dragon of propriety where her pupils were concerned.

Harrie lingered by the window for a moment, looking wistfully after the slender figure, and slow, graceful walk.

"If he only knew," she murmured—"if he only knew the terrible secret that struck me down that night! But I dare not tell—I dare not, even if that voice from the dead had not forbidden me. I love him so dearly—so dearly! Ah, pitiful Lord, let him never know! If I lost him, too, I should die!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BARONET'S BRIDE.

The winter months had gone slowly by. Spring came, and still that most devoted of lovers, Sir Everard Kingsland, lingered in Paris, near his grey-eyed divinity. His life was no dull one in the gayest capital of Europe. He had hosts of friends, the purse of Fortunatus, the youth and beauty of a demi-god. Brilliant Parisian belles, flashing in ancestral diamonds, with the blue blood of the *ancien régime* in their delicate veins, showered their brightest smiles, their most entrancing glances, upon the handsome young Englishman in vain. His loyal heart never swerved in its allegiance to his grey-eyed queen—the love-light that lit her dear face, the warm, welcoming kiss of her cherry lips, were worth a hundred Parisian belles with their ducal coats of arms. "Faithful and True" was the motto on his seal; faithful and true in every word and thought—true as the needle to the North Star—was he to the lady of his love.

The weeks went, swiftly and pleasantly enough; but his red-letter day was the Saturday afternoon that brought him to his darling. And she, buried among her dry-as-dust school books and classic lore—how *she* looked forward to the weekly day of grace no words can tell.

But with the first bright days of April came a change. He was going back to England, he told her, one Saturday afternoon, as they sat, lover-like, side by side, in the prim *salon*. She gave a low cry at the words, and looked at him with wild, wide eyes.

"Going to England! Going to leave me!"

"My dearest, it is for your sake I go, and I will be gone but a little while. The end of next October our long year of waiting ends, and before the Christmas snow flies, my darling must be all my own. It is to prepare for our marriage I go."

She hid her glowing face on his shoulder.

"I would make Kingsland Court a very Paradise, if I could, for my bright little queen. As I cannot make it quite Paradise, I will do what I can."

"Any place is my Paradise so that you are there, Everard!"

And then there was an eloquent silence—the silence that always reigns where the joy is too intense for words or smiles.

"Landscape gardeners and upholsterers shall wave their magic wands and work their nineteenth-century miracles," he said, presently, reverting to his project. "My dear girl's future home shall be a very bower of delights. And, besides"—hesitating a little—"I want to see my mother. She feels herself a little slighted, I am afraid, after this winter's absence."

"Ah, your mother!"—with a little sigh.

"Will she ever like me, do you think, Everard? Her letter was so cold, so formal, so chilling."

For this high-stepping young lady, who had ridden at the fox-hunt with reckless daring, who was so regally uplifted and imperious, had grown very humble in her new love. Not that there is anything strange in that, for the haughtiest Cleopatra that ever set her royal heel on the necks of men becomes the veriest slave the moment she is subjugated by the grand passion.

Harriet had written to my lady a humble, girlish, appealing little letter, and had received the coldest of polite replies, beautifully written, with the "bloody hand," and the Kingsland crest emblazoned proudly, and the motto of the house in good old Norman French—"Strike once, and strike well."

Since then there had been no correspondence. Miss Hunsden was too proud to sue for her favour, had she been her queen as well as her mother-in-law elect, and Sir Everard loved her too sensitively to expose her to a possible rebuff.

My lady was utterly offended by her son's desertion of a whole winter. She was nothing to him now—she who had loved him

so long and so dearly, who had been his all for two-and-twenty years. This bold, masculine girl, with the horrible boy's name, was his all in all now.

Sir Everard Kingsland met with a very cold reception from his lady mother upon his return to Devonshire. She listened in still disdain to his glowing accounts of the marvels the summer would work.

"And all this for the penniless daughter of a half-pay captain," she thought, scornfully; "and Lady Louise might have been his wife!"

Sir Everard, in the sublime egotism of youth and happy love, ran heedlessly on.

"You and Milly shall retain your old rooms, of course," he said, "and have them altered or not, just as you choose. Harrie's rooms shall be in the south wing—she likes a sunny, southern prospect—and the winter and summer drawing-rooms must be completely refurnished, and the conservatory has been sadly neglected of late, and the oak panelling in the dining-room wants touching up. Hadn't you better give all the orders for your own apartments yourself? The others I will attend to."

"My orders are already given," Lady Kingsland said, with frigid hauteur. "My jointure house is to be fitted up. Before you return from your honeymoon I shall have quitted Kingsland Court with my daughter. Permit Mildred and me to retain our present apartments unaltered until that time; then the future Lady Kingsland can have the old rooms disfigured with as much gilding and stucco and ormolu as she pleases."

The young man's fair face blackened with an angry scowl as he listened to the taunting, spiteful speech. But he restrained himself.

"There is no necessity for your withdrawal from your old home. If you leave, it will be against my express wish. Neither my wife nor I could ever desire such a step."

"Your wife!" Her proud lips trembled and her dark eyes flashed. "Does she take state upon herself already? To you and your wife, Sir Everard Kingsland, I return my humble thanks, but even Kingsland Court is not large enough for two mistresses. I will never stand aside and see the pauper daughter of the half-pay captain rule where I ruled once!"

She swept majestically out of the room as she launched her last smarting shaft, leaving her son, with flashing eyes and face of suppressed rage, to recover his temper as best he might.

"He will never ask me again," she thought. "I know his nature too well."

And he did not. He went about his work with stern determination, never consulting her, never asking advice, or informing her of any project—always deferential, always studiously

polite. But the "half-pay captain's pauper daughter," from that hour, was as a wall of brass between the haughty mother and the proud son.

If Lady Kingsland held herself aloof, there was one person at the Court who made up, by the warmth of her greeting and the fervour of her sympathy, for any lack on her ladyship's part. It was Miss Sybilla Silver, of course, who somehow had grown to be as much a fixture there as the marble and bronze statues in the domed hall.

She had written to find her friends in Plymouth, or she said so, and failed, and she had managed to make herself so useful to my lady that my lady was very glad to keep her. She could make caps like a Parisian milliner; she could dress her exquisitely; she could read for hours in the sweetest and clearest of voices, without one yawn, the dullest of dull high-church novels. She could answer notes, and sing like a syren, and she could embroider *prie-dieu* chairs, and table-covers, and slippers, and handkerchiefs, and darn point lace, like Fairy Fingers herself.

She was a treasure, this *ex-lad* in velveteen, and my lady counted it a lucky day that brought her to Kingsland. But Miss Sybilla belonged to my lady's son, and not to my lady. To the young lord of Kingsland her allegiance was due, and at his bidding she was ready at a moment's notice to desert the female standard.

Sir Everard, who took a kindly interest in the dashing damsel with the coal-black hair and eyes, who had shot the poacher, put the question, one day, to her:

"My mother and sister leave before the end of the year, Sybilla—will *you* desert me, too?"

"Never, Sir Everard!" The black eyes dropped, and a high colour rose in the dusky cheeks. "I will never desert you whilst you wish me to stay."

"I should like it, I confess. It will be horribly dreary for my bride to come home to a house where there is no one to welcome her but the servants. If my mother can spare you, Sybilla, I wish you would stay."

As she had done once before, and ere he could prevent her, she lifted his hand to her lips.

"Sybilla belongs to *you*, Sir Everard! Command, and she will obey!"

He laughed, but he also reddened as he drew his hand hastily away.

"Oh, pooh! don't be melo-dramatic! There is no question of commanding and obeying about it. You are free to do as you please. If you choose to remain, give Lady Kingsland proper notice. If you prefer to go—why, I must look out for some one to take your place.

Don't be in a hurry; there's plenty of time to decide."

He walked off and left her. He was coolly indifferent to her shining beauty, her velvet black eyes, her glossy, raven ringlets, the tropical luxuriance of her Creole charms.

She looked after him with a snaky gleam in those weird black eyes.

"Plenty of time to decide!" she repeated with a slow, evil smile curling her thin lips. "My good Sir Everard, I decided long ago. Marry your fox-hunting bride—bring her home. Sybilla Silver will be here to welcome her, never fear."

The baronet stayed three weeks in England—then returned impatiently to Paris. Of course the rapture of the meeting more than repaid the pain of parting.

She was growing more beautiful every day, the infatuated young man thought, over her books; and the sun of France shone on nothing half so lovely as this tall, slender damsel, in her grey school uniform, and prim, black silk apron.

The summer went. Sir Everard crossed and recrossed the Channel, like an insane human pendulum, and the work went bravely on! Kingsland was being transformed—the landscape gardeners and the London upholsterers had *carte blanche*, and it was the story of Aladdin's Palace over again. Sir Everard rubbed his golden lamp, and lo! mighty genii rose up and worked wonders.

September came—the miracles ceased. Even money and men could do no more.

October came. Sir Everard's year of probation had expired. The Rev. Cyrus Green overcame heroically his horror of sea-sickness and steamers, and went to Paris in person for his ward. As plain Miss Hunsden, without a shilling to bless herself with, the Rev. Cyrus would not by any means have thought this extreme step necessary; but for the future Lady Kingsland to travel alone was not for an instant to be thought of. So he went, and the first week of November he brought her home.

Miss Hunsden—taller, more stately, more beautiful than ever—was very still and sad this first anniversary of her father's death. Lady Kingsland, when she and Mildred called—for they did, of course—was rather impressed by the stately girl in mourning, whose fair, proud face and calm grey eyes met hers so unflinchingly. Neither would yield an inch. Certainly Miss Hunsden was to blame, but Miss Hunsden was as proud a girl as ever traced back her genealogy to the Conquest, and had met with one decided rebuff already.

The wedding was to take place early in December; Sir Everard would not wait, and

Harrie seemed to have no will left but his. Once she had feebly uttered some remonstrance, but he had imperatively stopped her short.

"I have waited a year already. I will not wait one hour longer than I can possibly help now."

So this high-handed young tyrant had everything his own way. The preparations were hurried on with amazing haste; the day was named, the bridesmaids and guests bidden.

Miss Hunsden's young lady friends were few and far between, and Mildred Kingsland and the rector's sister and twelve-year-old daughter were to comprise the whole list.

The wedding-day dawned—a sullen, overcast, threatening December day. A watery sun looked out of a lowering sky, and then retreated altogether, and a leaden dullness overspread the whole firmament. An icy wind curdled your blood and tweaked your nose, and feathery snowflakes whirled drearily through the opaque gloom.

The church was full, and silks rustled and bright eyes flashed inquisitively, and people wondered who that tall, foreign-looking person beside my lady might be.

It was Sybilla Silver, gorgeous in golden silk, with her black eyes lit with cruel inward exultation, and who glared almost fiercely upon the beautiful bride.

My lady, magnificent in her superb disdain of all these childish proceedings, stood by and acknowledged in her heart of hearts that if beauty and grace be any excuse for folly, her son had those excuses.

Lovely as a vision, with her pure, pale, passionless face, her clear, sweet eyes, Harriet Hunsden swept up the aisle in her rich bridal robes, her floating lace, and virginal orange blossoms.

The bridegroom's eyes kindled with unutterable admiration, and pride, and love, as he took his place by her side, he himself looking as noble and gallant a gentleman as wide England could boast.

It was over—she was his wife! They had registered their names, they drove back to the rectory, the congratulations offered, the breakfast eaten, the toasts drank. She was up stairs dressing for her journey; the carriage and the bridegroom were waiting impatiently below.

Mrs. Green hovered about her with tearful eyes and matronly solicitude, and at the last moment Harriet flung herself impetuously upon her neck, and broke out into hysterical crying:

"Forgive me," she sobbed. "Oh, Mrs. Green, I never had a mother!"

Then she drew down her veil and ran out of

the room before the good woman could speak. Sir Everard was waiting in the hall; he drew her hand under his arm and hurried her away. Mrs. Green got down stairs only in time to see her in the carriage. She leaned forward to wave her gloved hand.

"Good-bye," she said—"good-bye, my good, kind friend!"

Then the bridegroom sprang lightly in beside her, the carriage door was closed, the horses started, and the happy pair were off for the month of banishment civilized society imperatively requires.

* * * * *

Sybilla Silver went back to the Court alone. My lady, in sullen dignity, took her daughter and went straight to her jointure house, at the other extremity of the park.

Sybilla stood in the centre of a lengthy suite of apartments—the new Lady Kingsland's—opening one into the other in a long vista of splendour. She took a portrait out of her breast and gazed at it with brightly-glittering eyes.

"A whole year has passed, my mother," she said, slowly, "and nothing has been done. But Sybilla will keep her oath: Sir Jasper Kingsland's only son shall meet his doom. It is through her I will strike; that blow will be doubly bitter. Before this day twelvemonth dawns, these two, so loving, so hopeful, so happy now, shall part more horribly and unnaturally than man and wife ever parted before!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. PARMALEE'S LITTLE MYSTERY.

Kingsland Court had from time immemorial been one of the show places of the county, Thursday being always set apart as the visitors' day.

The portly old housekeeper used to play cicerone, but the portly old housekeeper, growing portlier and older every day, got in time quite unable to waddle up and down, and pant out gasping explanations to the strangers.

So Miss Sybilla Silver, with her usual good nature, came to the rescue, got the history of the old house, and the old pictures, and cabinets, and curiosities, and suits of armour and things by heart, and took Mrs. Comfit's place.

Visitors, as a general thing, stood rather in awe of the tall and stately young lady, in her sweeping black silk robes, her great black eyes and Assyrian style generally, and were apt to mistake her at first for the lady of the manor.

And in spite of Miss Silver's ceaseless smiles,

and perfect willingness to oblige and be useful, it was a remarkable fact that every servant in the house hated her like poison, excepting two tall footmen and a stable-boy, who were madly in love with her.

The first Thursday after the marriage of Sir Everard, there came sauntering up to the Court, in the course of the afternoon, a tall young gentleman, smoking a cigar, and with his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets.

He was not only tall, but uncommonly tall, uncommonly lanky and loose-boned, and his clothes had the general air of being thrown on with a pitchfork.

He wore a redundancy of jewellery, in the shape of yards of watch-chain, a huge seal ring on each little finger, and a flaring diamond breast-pin, of doubtful quality.

His clothes were light, his hair was light, his eyes were light. He was utterly devoid of hire-sute appendages, and withal he was tolerably good-looking, and unmistakably wideawake.

He threw away his cigar as he reached the house, and astonished the understrapper who admitted him by presenting his card with a flourishing bow.

"Jest give that to the master, my man," said this personage, coolly. "I understand you allow strangers to explore this old castle of yours, and I've come quite a piece for that express purpose."

The footman gazed at him, then at the card in sheer bewilderment a moment, and then went and sought out Miss Silver.

"Blessed if it isn't that 'Merican that's stopping at the Vine, and that asked so many questions about Sir Everard and my lady, of Dawson, last night," he said.

Sybilla took the card curiously. It was a *bond-fide* piece of pasteboard, printed all over, in little, stumpy capitals:

GEORGE WASHINGTON PARMALEE,
PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTIST,
No. 1,060, BROADWAY.
UP STAIRS.

Miss Silver laughed.

"The gentleman wants to see the house, does he? Of course he must see it, then, Higgins. And he was asking questions of Dawson last night at the inn?"

"Lots of questions, Miss Silver, all about Sir Everard and my lady—our young lady, you know. Shall I fetch him up?"

"Certainly."

There chanced to be no visitor at the Court, and Sybilla received Mr. Parmalee with infinite smiles and condescension. The tall American looked rather impressed by the majestic young

lady with the great black eyes and superbly handsome face, but not in the least embarrassed.

"Beg your pardon, miss," he said, politely; "sorry to put you to so much trouble, but I calculated on seeing this old pile before I left these parts, and as they told me down at the tavern this was the day"—

"It is not the slightest trouble, I assure you," Miss Silver interposed, graciously. "I am only too happy to have a stranger come and break the quiet monotony of our life here. And, besides, it affords me double pleasure to make the acquaintance of an American—a people I much admire. You are the first I ever had the pleasure of meeting."

This was doing the gracious to an unheard-of extent; but the gentleman addressed did not appear in the least overcome.

"Want to know!" said Mr. Parmalee, in a tone betokening no earthly emotion whatever. "It's odd, too—plenty of folks round about; but I suppose they didn't happen along down here. Splendid place this—fine growing land all round; but I see most of it is let run wild. If all that there timber was cut down, and the stumps burned out, and the ground turned into pasture, you hain't no idea what an improvement it would be. But you Britishers don't go in for progress, and that sort of thing. This old castle, now—it's as much as two hundred years old, I'll be bound."

"More than that—twice as old. Will you come and look at the pictures now? Being an artist, of course you will like to see the pictures first. The collection is superb."

Mr. Parmalee followed the young lady to the long picture gallery, his hands still in his pockets, whistling softly to himself, and eyeing everything with his keen, shrewd, light-blue eyes.

"Must have cost a sight of money, all these fixings," he remarked, thoughtfully. "I know how them statues and busts reckons up. This here baronet must be a powerfully rich man."

"He is," said Miss Silver, quietly.

Mr. Parmalee fell into thought—came out of it—looked at Sybilla curiously.

"Beg your pardon, miss, but are you one of the family?"

"No, sir"—flushing a little. "I am Lady Kingsland's companion."

"Oh, a domestic!" said Mr. Parmalee, as if to himself. "Who'd ha' thought it? Lady Kingsland's companion! Which of 'em? There's two, ain't there?"

"Sir Everard's mother has left Kingsland Court. I am companion to Sir Everard's wife."

"Ah, jest so! Got married lately, didn't he? Might I ask your name, miss?"

"I am Sybilla Silver."

"Thanky," said Mr. Parmalee, with a satisfied nod. "So much easier getting along when you know a person's name. Married a Miss Hunsden, didn't he—the baronet?"

"Yes. Miss Harriet Hunsden."

"That's her. Lived with her pa, an old officer in the army, didn't she? Used to be over there in America?"

"Yes." Sybilla caught her breath suddenly. "Did you know her?"

"Wa-al, no," replied Mr. Parmalee, with a drawl, and a queer sidelong look at the lady, "I can't say I did. They told me down at the tavern all about it. Handsome young lady, wasn't she? One of your tall-stepping, high-mettled sort?"

"Yes."

"And her pa's dead, and he left her nothing? Poor as a church mouse, wasn't he?"

"Captain Hunsden had little beyond his pay," answered Miss Silver, wondering where this catechism was to end.

"And they've gone off on a bridal tour? Now when do you expect them back?"

"In a month. Are you particularly desirous of seeing Sir Everard or Lady Kingsland?" asked Sybilla, suddenly and sharply.

Again the tall American eyed her askance.

"Well, yes," he said, slowly—"I am. I'm collecting photographic views of all your principal buildings over here, and I'm going to ask Sir Everard to let me take this place, inside and out. These rooms are the most scrumptious concerns I've seen lately, and the Fifth Avenue Hotel is some pumpkins, too. Oh, these are the pictures, are they? What a jolly lot!"

Mr. Parmalee became immediately absorbed by the hosts of dead-and-gone Kingslands looking down from the oak-pannelled walls. Miss Silver fluently gave him names, and dates, and histories.

"Seems to me," said Mr. Parmalee, "those old fellows didn't die in their beds—many of 'em. What with battles, and duels, and high treason, and sich, they all came to unpleasant ends. Where's the present Kingslands?"

"Sir Everard's portrait is in the library."

"And her ladyship—his wife?"

"We have no picture of Lady Kingsland as yet."

Mr. Parmalee's inscrutable face told nothing—whether he was disappointed or not. He followed Miss Silver all over the house, saw everything worth seeing, and took the "hull concern," as he expressed it, as a matter of course. The short winter afternoon was done before the sights were.

"Should like to come again," said Mr. Parmalee. "A feller couldn't see all that's worth seeing round here in less than a month. Might I step up again to-morrow, Miss Silver?"

Miss Silver shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. Thursday is visitors' day, and I dare not infringe the rules. You may come every Thursday whilst you stay, and meantime the gardeners will show you over the grounds whenever you desire. How long do you remain, Mr. Parmalee?"

"That's uncertain," replied the photographic artist, cautiously. "Perhaps not long, perhaps longer! I'm much obliged to you, miss, for all the bother I've made you."

"Not at all," said Sybilla, politely. "I shall be happy at any time to give you any information in my power."

"Thanky. Good evening."

The tall American swung off with long strides. The young lady watched him out of sight.

"There is more in this than meets the eye," she thought. "That man knows something of Harriet—Lady Kingsland. I'll cultivate him for my lady's sake."

After that Mr. Parmalee and Miss Silver met frequently. In her walks to the village it got to be the regular thing for the American to become her escort, and almost every day found him meandering aimlessly about the grounds.

He was rather clever at pencil drawing, and made numerous sketches of the house, and took the likenesses of all the servants. He even set up a temporary photographic place down in the village, and announced himself ready to "take" the whole population at so much per head.

"There's nothing like making hay while the sun shines," remarked Mr. Parmalee to himself. "I may as well do a little stroke of business, to keep my hand in, while I wait for my lady. There ain't no telling how this little speculation of mine may turn out, after all."

So the weeks went by, and every Thursday found the American exploring the house. He was a curious study to Sybilla as he went along, his hands invariably in his pockets, his hat pushed to the back of his head, whistling softly and meditatively.

Every day she became more convinced he knew something of Harriet Hunsden's American antecedents, and every day she grew more gracious. But if Mr. Parmalee had his secrets, he knew how to keep them. Whilst fully appreciating the handsome young lady's showering smiles, and evidently considerably in love, he yet never dropped the faintest clue.

"Can he ever have been a lover of hers in

New York?" Sybilla asked herself. "I know she was there two years at school."

But it seemed improbable. Harrie could not have been over thirteen or fourteen at the time. She could discover nothing. Mr. Parmalee kept his own counsel.

The honeymoon month passed—the January day that was to bring the happy pair home arrived. In the golden sunset of a glorious winter day, the carriage rolled up the avenue, and Sir Everard handed Lady Kingsland out.

The long line of servants were drawn up in the hall, with Mrs. Comfit and Miss Silver at their head. High and happy as a young prince, Sir Everard strode in among them, with his bride on his arm. And she—Sybilla Silver—set her teeth as she looked at her, so gloriously radiant in her wedded bliss. She seemed to have received a new baptism of beauty. She looked a brilliant young queen by royal right of that radiant loveliness.

Mr. Parmalee, lounging among the trees, caught one glimpse of that exquisite face as it flashed by.

"By George, *ain't* she a stunner! Not a bit like t'other one, with her black eyes and tarry hair. I've seen quadroom girls, down South, whiter than Miss Silver. And, what's more, she isn't a bit like—the lady in London, that she *ought* to look like."

Sybilla saw very little of Sir Everard or his bride that evening. They dined *tête-à-tête*, and, after their journey, retired early. But the next morning, at breakfast, she broached the subject of Mr. Parmalee.

"Wants to take photographic views of the place—does he?" said Sir Everard, carelessly. "Is he too timid to speak for himself, Sybilla? His countrymen, as a rule, are not addicted to bashfulness."

"Mr. Parmalee is not in the least bashful. He merely labours under the delusion that a petition proffered by me cannot fail."

"Oh, the man is welcome!" the baronet said, indifferently. "Let him amuse himself, by all means. If the views are good, I will have some myself."

Mr. Parmalee presented himself in the course of the day. It was hopelessly wet and wintry, but, with placid contempt for the elements, the American, shielded by a huge cotton umbrella, stalked up to the Court.

Sir Everard received him politely in the library.

"Most assuredly, Mr.—oh, Parmalee! Take the views, of course. I am glad you admire Kingsland. You have been making some sketches already, Miss Silver tells me."

Miss Silver herself had ushered the gentleman in, and now stood lingeringly by the door.

My lady sat watching the ceaseless rain with indolent eyes, holding a novel in her lap, and looking very serene and handsome.

"Well, yes," Mr. Parmalee admitted, glancing modestly at the plethoric portfolio he carried under his arm. "Would your lordship mind taking a look at them? I've got some uncommon neat views of our American scenery, too—Mammoth Cave, Niagry Falls, White Mountains, and so on. Might help to pass a rainy afternoon."

Sir Everard laughed good-naturedly. He was so supremely blessed himself that he quite forgot to be proud; and the afternoon was hopelessly wet.

"Very true, Mr. Parmalee—it might. Let us see your American views, then. Taken by yourself, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," responded the artist, with emphasis. "Every one of 'em. And done justice to. Look a-here!"

He opened his portfolio and spread his "views" out.

Lady Kingsland arose with languid grace and crossed over. Her husband seated her beside him, with a loving smile. Her back was partly turned to the American, whom she had met without the faintest shade of recognition.

Sybilla Silver, eager and expectant of she knew not what, lingered and looked likewise.

The "views" were really very good, and there was an abundance of them—White Mountain and Hudson River scenery, Niagara, Nahant, Southern and Western scenes. Then he produced photographic portraits of all the American celebrities—presidents, statesmen, authors, actors, and artists.

Lady Kingsland looked at these latter with considerable interest. Some of the actors she had seen; many of the authors she had read.

Mr. Parmalee watched her from under intent brows as she took them daintily up in her slender, jewelled fingers, one by one.

"I have a few portraits here," he said, after a pause, "painted on ivory, of American ladies remarkable for their beauty. Here they are."

He took out five, presenting them one by one to Sir Everard. He had not presumed to address Lady Kingsland directly. The first was a little Southern quadroom; the second a bright-looking young squaw. The baronet laughed.

"These are your American ladies, are they? Pretty enough to be ladies, certainly. Look, Harrie. Isn't that Indian face exquisite?"

He passed them to his wife. The third was an actress, the fourth a *danseuse*. All were

butiful. With the last in his hand, Mr. Parmalee paused, and the first change Sybilla had ever seen cross his face crossed it then.

"This one I prize most of all," he said, speaking slowly and distinctly, and looking furtively at my lady. "This lady's story was the saddest story I ever heard."

Sybilla looked eagerly across the baronet's shoulder for a second. It was a lovely face, pure and childlike, with great, innocent blue eyes, and waving brown hair—the face of a girl of sixteen.

"It is very pretty," the baronet said, carelessly; and he passed it to his wife.

Lady Kingsland took it quite as carelessly. The next instant she had turned sharply around and looked Mr. Parmalee full in the face.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE PICTURE GALLERY.

When Lady Kingsland turned quickly round at the sight of the miniature, the American had evidently expected it, for he had glanced away abruptly, and then began hustling his pictures back into his portfolio. Sybilla could see he was flushed dark red. She turned to my lady—she was deathly pale.

"Did you paint those portraits too?" she asked, speaking for the first time.

"No, marm—my lady, I mean. I collected these as curiosities. One of 'em—the one you're looking at—was given me by the original herself."

The picture dropped from my lady's hand as if it had been red-hot. Mr. Parmalee bounced forward, and picked it up with imperturbable sang froid.

"I value this the most of all my collection. I knew the lady well. I wouldn't lose it for any amount of money."

My lady rose abruptly and walked to the window, and the hue of her face was the hue of death. Sybilla Silver's glittering eyes went from face to face.

"I reckon I'll be going now," Mr. Parmalee remarked. "The rain seems to hold up a little. I'll be along to-morrow, Sir Everard, to take those views. Much obliged to you for your kindness. Good day."

He glanced furtively at the stately figure by the window, standing still as if turning to stone. But she neither looked, nor moved, nor spoke.

* * * * *

Mr. Parmalee, true to his promise, presented himself at the earliest admissible hour next day, with all the apparatus of his art.

So early was it, indeed, that Sybilla was just pouring out the baronet's first cup of tea, whilst he leisurely opened the letters brought by that morning's post.

Lady Kingsland complained of a bad headache, her husband said, and would not leave her room until dinner.

Sir Everard made this announcement, quietly opening his letters. Sybilla looked at him with furtive, gleaming eyes. The time had come for her to begin to lay her train.

My lady had ascended to her room immediately upon the departure of the American the preceding day, and had been invisible ever since. That convenient feminine excuse—headache—had accounted for it; but Sybilla Silver knew better. She had expected her to breakfast this morning, and she began to think Mr. Parmalee's little mystery was more of a mystery than even she had dreamed. The announcement of the man's arrival gave her her cue.

"Our American friend is a devotee of art, it seems," she said, with a light laugh. "He lets no grass grow under his feet. I had no easy task to restrain his artistic ardour within due limits during your absence. I never knew such an inquisitive person, either. He did nothing but ask questions."

"A national trait," Sir Everard responded, with a shrug. "Americans are all inquisitive, which accounts for their go-aheadativeness, I daresay."

"Mr. Parmalee's questions, however, took a very narrow range. They only comprised one subject—you and my lady."

The young baronet looked up in haughty amaze.

"His curiosity on this subject was insatiable. Your most minute biography would not have satisfied him—about Lady Kingsland particularly. In point of fact, I thought he must have known her in New York, his questions were so pointed, and I asked him so directly."

The stare of haughty surprise gave place to one of astonished anger, as the baronet bent his brows and looked sternly across the table.

"And what did he say?"

"Oh, he said no," replied Sybilla, lightly, "but in such a manner as led me to infer yes. However, it was evident, yesterday, that my lady had never set eyes on him before; but I did fancy, for an instant, she somehow recognized that picture."

"What picture?" asked the baronet, sharply, his brows knit in an angry frown.

"That last portrait he showed her," Miss Silver answered, still in the same light tone.

"Yet that may have been only fancy too."

The angry frown deepened and darkened.

The blue blood of the Kingslands was prone to heat easily.

"Then, Miss Silver, have the goodness to indulge in no more such *fancies*. I don't care to hear your suspicions and surmises, and I don't choose to have my wife so minutely watched. As for this too inquisitive Yankee, he had better cease his questions, if he wishes to quit England with sound bones."

He rose angrily from the table, swept his letters together, and left the room. But his cheeks wore a deep-red flush, and his bent brows never relaxed. The first poisonous suspicion had entered his mind, and the calm of perfect trust would never reign there again.

Sybilla gazed after him, with her dark, evil smile.

"Cæsar's wife must be above reproach, of course. Fume and fret as you please, my dear Sir Everard, but this is only sowing the first seed. I shall watch your wife, and I will tell you my suspicions and my fancies, and you will listen in spite of your uplifted sublimity now. Jealousy is ingrained in your nature, though you do not know it, and a very little breath will fan the tiny coal into an inextinguishable flame."

She arose, rang the bell for the servant to clear the table, shook out her black silk robe, and went, with a smile on her handsome face, to do the fascinating to Mr. Parmalee.

She found that cautious gentleman busily arranging his implements in the picture gallery, preparatory to taking sundry views of the noble room. He nodded gravely to the young lady, and went steadfastly on with his work.

"You certainly lose no time, Mr. Parmalee," Miss Silver said. "I was remarking to Sir Everard at breakfast that you were a perfect devotee of art."

Mr. Parmalee nodded again in acknowledgment of the compliment.

"How does the baronet find himself this morning?" he asked.

"As usual—well."

"And her ladyship?"—very carelessly.

"Her ladyship is *not* well. I'm afraid your pretty pictures disagreed with her, Mr. Parmalee."

"Eh?" said the artist, with a sharp, suspicious stare.

Miss Silver laughed.

"She was perfectly well until you showed them to her. She has been ill ever since. One must draw one's own inference."

Mr. Parmalee busied himself some five minutes in profound silence. Then he asked:

"Where is she to-day? Ain't she about?"

"No. I told you she was ill. She com-

plained of headache after you left yesterday, and went up to her own room. I have not seen her since."

Mr. Parmalee began to whistle a negro melody, and still went industriously on with his work.

"I don't think nothing of *that*," he remarked, after a prolonged pause. "Fine ladies all have headaches. You have yourself, sometimes, I guess!"

"No," said Sybilla; "I'm not a fine lady. I have no time to sham headaches, and I have no secrets to get loose. I'm only a fine lady's companion, and all the world is free to know my history."

And then Miss Silver looked at Mr. Parmalee, and Mr. Parmalee looked at Miss Silver, with the air of two accomplished duellists waiting for the word.

"He's as sharp as a razor," thought the lady, "and as shy as a partridge. Half-measures won't do with him. I must fight him on his own ground."

"By Jingo, she's as keen as a catamount!" thought the gentleman, in a burst of admiration. "She'll be a credit to the man that marries her. What a pity she don't belong down in Maine! She's a sight too cute for a born Britisher."

There was a long pause. Miss Silver and Mr. Parmalee looked each other full in the eye without winking. All at once the gentleman burst out laughing.

"Get out!" said Mr. Parmalee. "Go 'long—do! You're too smart for this world—you are, by gosh, Miss Sybilla Silver!"

"Almost smart enough for a Yankee, Mr. Parmalee, and wonderfully good at guessing."

"Yes. And what have you guessed this time?"

"That you have Lady Kingsland's secret; that *that* portrait—the last of the five—is the clue. That you hold the baronet's bride in the hollow of your hand!"

She spoke the last words close to his ear in a fierce, sibilant whisper. The American actually recoiled.

"Go 'long!" repeated Mr. Parmalee. "Don't you go whistling in a fellow's ear like that, Miss S.; it tickles. Got any more to say?"

"Only this—that you had better make a friend of me, Mr. Parmalee."

There was a glittering menace in her black eyes—a hard, threatening undertone in her voice. But the American lost not an atom of his imperturbable *sang froid*.

"And if I don't, Miss S.? If I prefer to do as we do in euche, 'go it alone'—what then?"

"Then!" cried Sybilla, with a blaze of her black eyes, "I'll take the game out of your

hands. I'll foil you with your own weapons! I never failed yet; I'll not fail now. I'm a match for a dozen such as you."

"I believe, in my soul, you are!" exclaimed the artist, in a burst of admiring enthusiasm. "You're the real grit, and no mistake! I do admire sharp girls—I do, by Jingo! I always thought if I married and fetched a Mrs. George Washington Parmalee down to Maine, she'd have to be something more than common. And you're not common, Miss S.—not by a long chalk! I never met your match in my life."

"No," said Sybilla, smiling, and rather surprised by this outburst; "not even 'down to Maine?'"

"No, by George; and we raise the smartest kind of girls there. Now, Miss Silver, supposing we go partners in this here concern, would you be willing to go partners with a fellow for life? I never thought to marry an Englishwoman, but I'll marry *you* to-morrow, if you'll have me! What d'ye say? Is it a go?"

It was rarely, indeed, Miss Silver lost her admirable presence of mind, but for a moment she lost it entirely now. She fairly gasped for breath in her complete amazement. Only for a moment, though. Then, as the utter absurdity of the affair struck her, she went off in an inextinguishable fit of laughter.

"You don't mean it, Mr. Parmalee?"—as soon as she could speak.

"I do," said Mr. Parmalee, with emphasis. "Laugh, if you like. It's kind of sudden, I suppose, but I've had a hankering after you this some time. You're a right smart kind of girl, and jest my sort, and I like you tip-top. The way you can roll up them black eyes of yours at a fellow is a caution to rattlesnakes! Say, is it a go?"

Sybilla turned away. Her dark cheeks reddened. There was a moment's hesitation, then she turned back and extended her hand.

"You are not very romantic, Mr. Parmalee. You don't ask me for love, or any of that sentimental nonsense"—with a laugh. "And you really mean it—you really mean to make Lady Kingsland's poor companion your wife?"

"Never meant anything more in my life! It is a go, then?"

"I will marry you, Mr. Parmalee, if you desire it!"

"And you won't go back on a fellow?" asked Mr. Parmalee, suspiciously. "You're not fooling me just to get at this secret, are you?"

Sybilla drew away her hand with an offended air.

"Think better of me, Mr. Parmalee! I may be shrewd enough to guess at your secret, with-

out being base enough to tell a deliberate lie to know it. I could find it out by easier means."

"I don't know about that," said the artist, coolly. "It ain't likely Lady Kingsland would tell you, and you couldn't get it out of *me*, you know, if you was twice as clever, unless I chose. But I want you to help me. A man always gets along better in these little underhand matters when he's got a woman going partners with him. I want to see my lady. I want to send her a note all unbeknown to the baronet."

"I'll deliver it," said Sybilla, promptly; "and if she chooses to see you, I will manage that Sir Everard will not intrude."

"She'll see me fast enough. I thought she'd want to see me herself before this, but it appears she's inclined to hold out; so I'll drop her a hint in writing. If the mountain won't come to what's-his-name—you know what I mean, Miss Silver. I suppose I may call you Sybilla now?"

"Oh, undoubtedly, Mr. Parmalee! But, for the present, don't you think—just to keep people's tongues quiet, you know—had we not better keep this little private compact to ourselves? I don't want the gossiping servants of the house to gossip in the kitchen conclave about you and me."

Mr. Parmalee gave one of his sapient nods.

"Just as you please. I don't care a darn for their gossiping, though. And now about that little note—I want to see my lady before I explain things to you, you know."

"And why? You don't intend to tell her. I am to be taken into your confidence, I suppose?"

"Not much!" said Mr. Parmalee, emphatically. "Never you mind, Sybilla. Before you become Mrs. P., you'll know it all safe enough. I'll write it at once."

He took a stumpy lead pencil from his pocket, tore a leaf out of his pocket-book, and wrote these words:

My Lady,—You know the picture, and I know your secret. Should like to see you, if convenient, soon. That person is in London, waiting to hear from me.—Your most obedient

G. W. PARMALEE.

The photographer handed the scrawl to Sybilla.

"Read it."

"Well?" she said, taking it all in at a glance.

"Give her this. She'll see me before I leave this house, or I'm much mistaken. She's a very handsome and a very proud lady, this baronet's lady; but for all that, she'll obey G. W. Parmalee's orders, or he'll know the reason why."

CHAPTER XIX.

MISS SILVER PLAYS HER FIRST CARD.

It was all very well for Sir Everard Kingsland to ride his high horse in the presence of Miss Sybilla Silver, and superbly rebuke her suspicions of his wife, but her words had planted their sting, nevertheless.

He was one of those unhappy men who are "inclined to be jealous"—men in whose breasts suspicion, once planted, flourishes for ever. His face was very dark as he paced up and down the library, revolving over and over the few light words his protégée had dropped.

He loved his beautiful, imperious, grey-eyed wife with so absorbing and intense a love that the faintest doubt of her was torture inexpressible.

"I remember it all now," he said to himself, setting his teeth; "she *was* agitated at sight of that picture. She turned, with the strangest look in her face I ever saw there, to the American, and rose abruptly from the table immediately after. She has not been herself since—she has not once left her room. Is she afraid of meeting that man? Is there any secret in her life that he shares? What do I know of her past life, save that she has been over the world with her father? Good Heaven, if she and this strange man should have a secret between them, after all!"

The cold drops actually stood on his brow at the thought. The fierce, indomitable pride of his haughty race and the man's own inward jealousy made the bare suspicion agony. But a moment after, and with a sudden impulse of generous love, he recoiled from his own thoughts.

"I am a wretch," he thought—"a traitor to the best and most beautiful of brides—to harbour such an unworthy idea. What! shall I doubt my darling girl because Sybilla Silver thinks she recognized that portrait, or because an inquisitive stranger chooses to ask questions? No! I could stake my life on her perfect truth and purity—my own dear wife!"

Impulsively he turned to go. At once he must seek her and set every doubt at rest. He ascended rapidly to her room and softly tapped at the door. There was no answer. He knocked again. Still no response. He turned the handle and went in.

She was asleep. Lying on a sofa among a heap of pillows, arrayed in a white dressing-gown, her profuse dark hair all loose and disordered, Lady Kingsland lay, so profoundly sleeping that her husband's knocking had not disturbed her. Her face was as white as her

robe, and her eyelashes were wet, as though she had cried herself to sleep like a child.

She had not closed an eye the livelong night before, and here, in the quiet of the early morning, she had dropped off into the profound slumber that no trouble can long keep from the young and the healthy.

The handsome face of Everard Kingsland softened, and grew luminous with unutterable love.

"My love—my darling!" He knelt beside her and kissed her passionately. "And to think that for one second I was base enough to doubt you! My beautiful, innocent darling, slumbering here like a very child! No earthly power shall ever sunder you and me."

A pair of deriding black eyes flashed upon him through the partly-open door—a pair of greedy ears drank in the softly-murmured words. Sybilla Silver, hastening along with the artist's little note, had caught sight of the baronet entering his wife's room. She tapped discreetly at the door, with the twisted note held conspicuously in her hand.

Sir Everard arose and opened it, and Miss Silver's sudden recoil was the perfection of confusion and surprise.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Everard. My lady is—is she not here?"

"Lady Kingsland is asleep. Do you wish to deliver that note?"

With a second gesture of seeming confusion, Sybilla hid the hand which held it in the folds of her dress.

"Yes—no—it doesn't matter. It can wait, I daresay. He didn't mention being in a hurry."

"*He!* Of whom are you speaking, Sybilla?"

"I—I chanced to pass through the picture gallery five minutes ago, Sir Everard, and Mr. Parmalee asked me to do him the favour of handing this note to my lady."

Sir Everard Kingsland's face was the face of a man utterly confounded.

"Mr. Parmalee asked you to deliver that note to Lady Kingsland?" he slowly repeated.

"What under heaven can he have to write to my lady about?"

"I really don't know, Sir Everard," rejoined Sybilla, her characteristic composure seeming all at once to return. "I only know he asked me to deliver it. He had been looking for my lady's maid, I fancy, in vain. It is probably something about his tiresome pictures. Will you please take it, Sir Everard, or shall I wait until my lady awakes?"

"You may leave it."

He spoke the words mechanically, quite stunned by the overwhelming fact that this

audacious photographic person dared write to his wife. Miss Silver passed him, placed the twisted paper on one of the inlaid tables, and left the room with a triumphant light in her deriding black eyes.

"I have gained my first trick," Sybilla thought, as she walked away, "and I fancy the game will be all my own shortly. Sir Everard will open and read Mr. Parmalee's little *billet-doux* the instant he is alone."

But just here Sybilla was mistaken. Sir Everard did not open the tempting twisted note. He glanced at it once, with a darkly lowering brow, as it lay on the table, but he made no attempt to take it.

"She will show it to me when she awakes," he said, with compressed lips, "and then I will have this impertinent Yankee kicked from the house."

He sat beside her, watching her whilst she slept, with a face quite colourless between conflicting love and torturing doubt. His wife held some secret with this strange man—that one thought in itself was enough to drive him wild.

Nearly an hour passed before Harriet awoke. The great dark eyes opened in wide surprise at sight of that pale, intense face bending so devotedly over her.

"You here, Everard?" she said, sitting up and pushing away the tangled mass of waving hair. "How long have I been asleep? How long have you been here?"

"Over an hour, Harrie."

"So long? I had no idea of going to sleep when I lay down; but my head ached with a dull, hopeless pain, and— What is that?"

She broke off in what she was saying to ask the question abruptly. She had caught sight of the note lying on the table.

Her husband fixed his eyes keenly on her face, and asked, with measured slowness:

"You will scarcely believe it, but that stranger—that American artist—has had the impertinence to address that note to you. Sybilla Silver brought it here. Shall I ring for your maid and send it back unopened, and order him out of the house for his pains?"

"No!" said Harriet, impetuously. "I must read it. I must see what he says."

She snatched it up. She tore it open, and, walking over to the window, read the scrawl. So long she stood there that she might have read over two dozen such.

"Harriet!"

She turned slowly round at her name, spoken by her husband as that adoring husband had never spoken it before, and faced him, white to the very lips.

"Give me that note."

He held out his hand. She crushed it firmly in her own, looking him straight in the eyes.

"I cannot."

"You cannot!" he repeated, slowly, deadly pale. "Do I understand you aright, Harriet? Remember, I left that note untouched while you slept, waiting for you to show it to me. No man has a right to address a note to my wife that I may not see. Show me that paper, Harriet."

"It is nothing"—she caught her breath in a quick, gasping, affrighted way as she said it—"it is nothing, Sir Everard. Don't ask me!"

"If it is nothing, I may surely see it. Harriet, I command you! Show me that note!"

The eyes of Captain Hunsden's daughter flamed up fierce and bright at sound of that imperious word—*command*. She drew her slender figure, with sudden, imperial grace, to its fullest height.

"And I don't choose to be *commanded*—not if you were my king as well as my husband. You shall *never* see it now;" and she flung the note impetuously as she spoke into the fire. One bright jet of flame, and it was gone.

Husband and wife stood facing each other, he deathly white, she flushed and defiant. He was the first to speak—the first to turn away.

"And this is the woman I loved—the wife I trusted—my bride of one short month!"

He had turned to quit the room, but two impetuous arms were around his neck, two impulsive lips covering his face with penitent, imploring kisses.

"Forgive me—forgive me!" Harriet cried. "My dear, my true, my cherished husband! Oh, what a wicked, ungrateful creature I am! What a wretch you must think me! And I cannot—I cannot—I *cannot* tell you!"

She broke out suddenly into a storm of hysterical crying, clinging to his neck.

He took her in his arms, "more in sorrow than in anger," sat down with her on the sofa, and let her sob herself still. His face was stern and set as stone.

"And now, Harriet," he said, when the hysterical sobs were hushed, "who is this man, and what is he to you?"

She answered him at once, to his surprise, passionately, almost fiercely:

"He is nothing to me—less than nothing! I hate him!"

"Where did you know him before?"

"Know him before!" She sat up and looked him half-angrily in the face. "I *never* knew him before. I never set eyes on him until I saw him here."

Sir Everard drew a long breath of intense

relief. No one could doubt her perfect truth, and his worst suspicion was at rest.

"Then what is this secret between you two—for there is a secret, Harriet?"

"There is."

He drew his hands away from her with a sudden motion.

"What is it, Harriet?"

"I cannot tell you."

"*Harriet!*"

"I cannot!" She turned deadly white as she said it, but her eyes met his unflinchingly. "Never, Everard! There is a secret, but a secret I can never reveal, even to you. Don't ask me—don't! If you ever loved me, try and trust me now!"

There was a blank pause. She tried to clasp him, but he held her sternly off.

"One question more. You knew this secret before you married me?"

"I did."

Her head drooped for the first time, and a scarlet suffusion dyed face and neck.

"For how long?"

"For a year."

"And that picture the American showed you is a person you know?"

She looked up at him, a wild, startled light in her great grey eyes.

"How do you know *that*?"

"I am answered," he said. "I see I am right. Once more, Lady Kingsland"—his voice cold and clear—"you refuse to tell me?"

"I must! Oh, Everard, for pity's sake, trust me! I cannot tell you—I dare not!"

"Enough, madam! Your accomplice shall!"

He turned to go—she made a step between him and the door.

"What are you going to do? Tell me, for I will know!"

"I am going to the man who shares your guilty secrets, madam; and, by the heaven above us, I'll have the truth out of him, if I have to tear it from his throat! Out of my way, before I forget you are a woman and strike you down at my feet!"

She staggered back with a low cry, as if he had struck her indeed. He strode past, his step ringing, his eyes flashing, his face livid with jealous rage, straight to the picture gallery.

A door at the opposite side of the corridor stood ajar. Sybilla Silver's listening ears heard the last fierce words—Sybilla Silver's glittering black eyes saw that last passionate gesture of repulsion. She saw Harriet—Lady Kingsland—the bride of a month, sink down on the oaken floor, quivering in mortal anguish from head to foot.

"Not one year," she cried to her exultant

heart—"not one month will I have to wait for my revenge! Lie there, poor fool!"—with a backward glance of passionate scorn at the prostrate figure—"and suffer and die, for what I care, while I go and prevent your madly jealous husband from braining my precious *fiancee*. There is to be blood on the hands and the brand of Cain on the brow of the last of the Kingslands, or my oath will not be kept; but it must not be the ignoble blood of George Washington Parmalee."

She glided away as she spoke, with 'he swift, serpentine grace peculiar to her, to make a third actor in a stormy scene.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. PARMALEE SWEARS VENGEANCE.

Sir Everard strode straight to the picture gallery, his face pale, his eyes flashing, his hands clenched.

His step rang like steel along the polished oaken floor, and there was an ominous compression of his thin lips that might have warned Mr. Parmalee of the storm to come. But Mr. Parmalee was squinting through his apparatus at a grim old warrior on the wall, and only just glanced up to nod recognition.

"Morning, Sir Everard!" said the artist, pursuing his work. "Fine day for our business—uncommon spring-like. You've got a gay old lot of ancestors here, and ancestresses, and very handsome some of 'em are, too, and no mistake."

"Spare your compliments, sir," said the baronet, in tones of suppressed rage, "and spare me your presence here for the future altogether. The sooner you pack your things and leave this, the surer you will be of finding yourself with a sound skin."

"*Eh?*" cried Mr. Parmalee, astounded. "What in thunder do you mean?"

"I mean that I order you out of my house this instant, and that I'll break every bone in your villainous carcase if ever I catch you inside my gates again!"

The artist stood blankly staring.

"By ginger! Why, Sir Everard Kingsland, I don't understand this here! You told me yourself I might come here and take the pictures. I call this deuced unhandsome treatment—I do, by George, going back on a feller like this."

"You audacious scoundrel!" roared the enraged young lord of Kingsland, "how dare you presume to answer me? How dare you stand there and look me in the face? If I called my servants and made them lash you outside the gates, I should only serve you right!

You low-bred, impertinent ruffian, how dare you write to my wife?"

It all burst upon Mr. Parmalee like a thunder-clap—the baronet had seen his note.

"Whew!" he whistled, long and shrill. "That's it, is it? The cat's out of the bag, the fat's in the fire, and all a-sizzin'! Look here, Sir Everard, don't you get so tearin' mad, all for nothing. I didn't write no disrespect to her ladyship—I didn't, by Jupiter! Miss Silver can tell you so, if you've a mind to ask her, or my lady herself, for that matter. I jest had a little request to make, and if I could have seen her ladyship I wouldn't have writ at all; but she kept out of my way, and"—

"You scoundrel!" cried the passionate young baronet, white with fury. "Do you mean to say my wife kept out of your way—was afraid of you?"

"Exactly so, squire," returned the imperturbable American. "She must ha' known I had something to say to her yesterday when I— Well, she *knowed* it, and she kept out of my way. I say it again."

The baronet's face was perfectly livid with suppressed rage.

"And you dare tell me there is a secret between my wife and you! Are you not afraid I will throw you out of yonder window?"

Mr. Parmalee drew himself stiffly up.

"Not if I know myself. *That* is a game two can play at. As for the secret"—with a sudden sneer—"I ain't no desire to keep it a secret if your wife ain't. Ask her, Sir Everard, and if she's willing to tell you, I'm sartin I am. But I don't think she will, by gosh!"

The sneering mockery of the last taunt was too much for the fiery young lord of Kingsland. With the yell of an enraged tiger, he sprang upon Mr. Parmalee, hurled him to the ground in a twinkling, and twisted his left hand into Mr. P.'s blue cotton neckerchief, showering blows with his right fast and furious.

The attack was so swift and savage that Mr. Parmalee lay perfectly stunned and helpless, turning unpleasantly black in the face, his eyes staring, the blood gushing.

Kneeling on his fallen foe, with fiery face and distended eyes, Sir Everard looked for the moment an incarnate young demon. It flashed upon him swift as lightning, in his sudden madness, what he was about.

"I'll murder him if I stay here!" he thought; and, as the thought crossed his mind, with a shriek and a swish of silk, in rushed Miss Silver and flung herself between them.

"Good Heaven, Sir Everard, have you gone mad? In mercy's name, stop before you have quite murdered him!"

Sir Everard sprang to his feet, ghastly still, with furious, flaming eyes and blood-spattered face.

"Hound! Cur!" he cried, spurning the sprawling artist with his boot. "Get up and quit my house, or, by the living light above us, I'll blow your brains out as I would a mad dog's!"

He swung round and strode out of the picture gallery; and slowly—slowly arose the prostrate hero, with blood-stained face and blackened eyes. With an utterly blank and piteous expression of face, Mr. Parmalee sat and gazed around, and, in spite of the tragic nature of the occurrence, it was all Sybilla could do to keep from laughing.

"Get up, Mr. Parmalee," she said, "and go away at once. The woman at the lodge will give you soap and water and a towel, and you can make yourself decent before entering the village. If you don't hurry you'll need a guide. Your eyes are as large as apples, and closing fast now."

She nearly laughed again, this tender *fiancée*, as she assisted her slaughtered betrothed to his feet. Mr. Parmalee wiped the blood off his face, and looked dizzily about him.

"Where is he?" he gasped.

"Sir Everard? He has gone, after belabouring you soundly. I believe he would have killed you outright, only I came in and tore him off. What on earth did you say to infuriate him so?"

"I say!" exclaimed the artist, fiercely. "I said nothing, and you know it. It was *you*, you confounded Delilah, you mischief-making deceiver, who showed him that here note!"

"I protest I did nothing of the sort!" cried Sybilla, indignantly. "He was in my lady's room when I entered, and he saw the note in my hand. She was asleep, and I tried to escape and take the note with me; but he ordered me to leave it and go. Of course I had to obey. If he read it, it was no fault of mine; but I don't believe he did. You have no right to blame me, Mr. Parmalee."

Mr. Parmalee ground out a savage oath between his clenched teeth.

"I'll be even with him for this, the insulting young aristocrat! I'll not spare him now! I'll spread the news far and wide; the very birds in the trees shall sing it, the story of his wife's shame! I'll lower that cursed pride of his before another month is over his head, and I'll have his handsome wife on her knees to me, as sure as my name's Parmalee! He knocked me down, and he beat me to a jelly, did he? And he orders me out of his house, and he'll shoot me like a mad dog, will he? But I'll be even with him. I'll make him

repent the day he ever lifted his hand to G. W. Parmalee!"

Miss Silver listened to this eloquent outburst of feeling with greedy, glistening black eyes, and patted her lover on the shoulder.

"So you shall. I like to hear you talk like that. You're a glorious fellow, George, and Sybilla will help you; for, listen"—she came close, and hissed the words in a venomous whisper—"I hate Sir Everard Kingsland and all of his race, and I hate his upstart wife, with her high and mighty airs, and I would see them both dead at my feet with all the pleasure in life!"

"You get out!" rejoined Mr. Parmalee, recoiling and clapping his hand to his ear. "I told you before, Sybilla, not to whistle in a fellow's ear like that. It goes through a chap like cold steel. As to your hating them, I believe in my soul you hate most people; and women like you, with big, flashing black eyes, are apt to be uncommon good haters, too. But what have they done to you? I always took 'em to be good friends to you, my girl."

Sybilla Silver laughed—a laugh hard and merciless, and most unpleasant to hear.

"You have read the fable, Mr. Parmalee, of the man who found the frozen adder, and who warmed and cherished it in his bosom, until he restored it to life? Well, Sir Everard found me, homeless, friendless, penniless, and he took me with him, and fed me, clothed me, protected me, and treated me like a sister. The adder in the fable stung its preserver to death. I, Mr. Parmalee, if you ever feel inclined to poison Sir Everard, will mix the potion and hold the bowl, and watch his death-throes!"

Mr. Parmalee looked at the beautiful speaker in astonishment, not unmixed with disgust. Her eyes shone like midnight stars, and a light such as might fitly illuminate King Lucifer's irradiated her dusky beauty.

"Go along with you!" said the American, beginning to collect his traps. "You're a bad one, you are, if there ever was a bad one yet! I don't like such lingo—I don't, by George! I never took you for an angel, but I vow I didn't think you were the cantankerous little toad you are! I don't set up to be a saint myself, and if a man knocks me down and pummels my innards out for nothin', I calk'late to fix his flint, if I can; but you—bah!—you're a little devil on earth, and that's my opinion."

Sybilla's eyes flashed, half in amusement, half in anger.

"With such a complimentary opinion of me, then, Mr. Parmalee, I presume our late partnership is dissolved?"

"Nothing of the sort! I like grit, and if

you've got rayther more than your share—why, when you're Mrs. Parmalee, it will be amusing to take it out of you. And now I'm off, and by all that's great and glorious there'll be howling and gnashing of teeth in this here old shop before I return!"

"You go without seeing my lady, then?" said Sybilla.

"My lady's got to come to me," retorted the artist, sullenly. "It's her turn to eat humble pie now, and she'll finish the dish, by George, before I've done with her! I'm going back to the tavern, down the village, and so you can tell her; and if she wants me, she can put her pride in her pocket and come there and find me."

"And I, too?" said Sybilla, anxiously, keeping by his side, as Mr. Parmalee stalked in sulky displeasure along. "Remember your promise to reveal all to me, George. Am I to seek you out at the inn, too, and await your sovereign pleasure?"

She laid her hands on his shoulders and looked up in his face with eyes few men could resist. "They were quite alone in the vast hall—no prying eyes to see that tender caress. Mr. Parmalee was a good deal of a stoic and a little of a cynic, but he was flesh and blood, as even stoics and cynics are when you come down to the fine thing, and the man under sixty was not born who could have resisted that dark, bewitching, wheedling, beautiful face."

The American artist took her in his long arms, with a vigorous hug, and favoured her with a sounding kiss.

"I'll tell you, Sybilla. Hanged if I don't believe you can twist me round your little finger if you choose! You're as pretty as a picture—you are, I swear—and I love you like all creation; and I'll marry you as soon as this little business is settled, and I'll take you to Maine, and keep you in the tallest sort of clover. I never calk'lated on having a British gal for a wife; but you're handsome enough for a President's lady, I swear, and I don't care a dence what the fellows round our part say about it. I'll tell you, Sybilla; but you mustn't split to a living soul, or my cake's dough. They say a woman can't keep a secret, but you must try, if you should burst for it. I reckon my lady will come down handsomely before I've done with her, and you and me, Sybilla, can go to housekeeping across the three thousand miles of everlasting wet in tip-top style. Come to-night; you've got to come to me now. It's as much as a fellow's life is worth to set foot here any more; and, by gracious, I ain't going to get thrashed by the funkeys for all the baronets and their brides this side of kingdom come!"

"No," Sybilla said, thoughtfully — "of course not. And I must go with you no further, lest we should be seen together, and our intimacy suspected. I suppose I shall find you at the inn?"

"I suppose so. 'Tain't likely," said Mr. Parmalee, with a sulky sense of injury, "you'll find me prancing up and down the village with this here face. I'll get the old woman to do it up in brown paper and vinegar when I go home, and I'll stay a-bed and smoke until dark. You won't come afore dark will you?"

"No. I don't want to be recognized, and you must be prepared to come out with me when I do. I'll disguise myself. Ah, suppose I disguise myself in men's clothes. You won't mind, will you?"

"By gosh! — no, if you don't. Men's clothes! What a rum one you are, Miss Silver! Deuced good-looking little feller you'll make. But why are you so skeery about it?"

"Why! Need you ask? Would Sir Everard permit me to remain in his house one hour if he suspected I was his enemy's friend? Have you any message to deliver to my lady before we part?"

"No. She'll send a message to me during the day, or I'm mistaken. If she don't — why, I'll send one back with you to-night. By-bye, Mrs. Parmalee that is to be. Take care of yourself until to-night."

The gentleman walked down the staircase alone towards a side entrance. The lady stood on the landing above, looking after him with a bitter, sneering smile.

"Mrs. Parmalee, indeed, you besotted idiot — you blind, conceited fool! Twist you round my little finger, can I! Yes, you great, hulking simpleton, and ten times better men. Let me worm your secret out of you, let me squeeze my sponge dry, and then see how I'll fling you into your native gutter!"

Mr. Parmalee, on his way out of the park, stopped at the pretty rustic lodge, and bathed his swollen and discoloured visage. The lodge-keeper's wife was all sympathy and questions. How on earth did it happen?

"Run up against the 'lectric telegraph, ma'am," replied Mr. Parmalee, sulkily, "and there was a message coming full speed, and it knocked me over. Morning! Much obliged."

He walked away. Outside the gates he paused and shook his clenched fist menacingly at the noble old house.

"I'll pay you out, my fine feller, if ever I get a chance. You're a very great man and a very proud man, Sir Everard Kingsland, and you own a fine fortune and a haughty, handsome wife, and G. W. Parmalee's no more than the mud under your feet. Very well —

we'll see! 'Every dog has his day,' and 'the longest lane has its turning,' and you're near about the end of *your* tether; and George Parmalee has you and your fine-lady wife under his thumb — under his thumb, and he'll crush you, sir — yes, by Heaven, he'll crush you, and strike you back blow for blow!"

Shaking the dust of Kingsland off his feet, Mr. Parmalee stalked like a sulky lion back to the Blue Bell Inn, and electrified everybody there by the transformation he had so suddenly undergone.

True to his word, he ordered unlimited supplies of brown paper and vinegar, rum and water, pipes and tobacco, swore at his questioners, and adjourned to his bed-room to await the coming of nightfall and Sybilla Silver.

The short winter day wore on. A good conscience, a sound digestion, rum and smoke *ad libitum*, enabled our wounded artist to sleep comfortably through it, and he was still snoring vociferously when Mrs. Wedge, the landlady, came to his bedside with a flaring tallow candle, and woke him up.

"Which I've been a-knockin' and a-knockin'," Mrs. Wedge cried, shrilly, fit to knock the skin off my blessed knuckles, Mr. Parmalee, and couldn't wake you no more'n the dead. And he's a-waitin' down stairs, which he won't come up, but says it's most particular, and must see you at once."

"Hold your noise!" growled the artist, tumbling out of bed. "What's o'clock? Leave that candle and clear out, and tell the young feller I'll be down in a brace of shakes. It is a young feller, isn't it?"

"I couldn't see him," replied Mrs. Wedge, "which he's that muffled up in a long cloak and a cap drawn down that his own mother herself couldn't tell him, out there in the dark. Was you a-expectin' of him, sir?"

"That's no business of yours, Mrs. Wedge," the American answered, grimly. "You can go."

Mrs. Wedge departed in displeasure, and tried again to see the muffled stranger. But he was looking out into the starlit darkness, and the good landlady was completely baffled.

She saw her lodger join him, she saw the hero of the cloak take his arm, and both walk briskly away.

"By George, this is a disguise!" exclaimed Mr. Parmalee. "I wouldn't recognize you at noonday, Sybilla, in this trim. Do you know who I took you for, until you spoke?"

"Whom?"

"Sir Everard himself. You're as like him as two peas in that rig, only not so tall."

"The cloak and cap are his," Miss Silver answered, "which perhaps accounts" —

But Mr. Parmalee, watching her curiously, shook his head.

"No," he said, "there's more than that. I might put on that cap and cloak, but I wouldn't look like the baronet. Your voices sound alike, and there's a general air—I can't describe it, but you know what I mean. You're no relation of his—are you, Sybilla?"

Sybilla laughed—the strangest laugh.

"A relation of the Prince of Kingsland—poor little Sybilla Silver! My good Mr. Parmalee, what an absurd idea! You do me honour even to hint that the blue blood of all the Kingslands could by any chance flow in these plebeian veins! Oh, no, indeed! I am only an upper servant in that great house, and would lose my place within the hour if its lordly master dreamed I was here talking to the man he hates. How is your poor face, Mr. Parmalee?"

Miss Silver's voice faltered a little as she put the question, perhaps with inward pain, perhaps with inward laughter—her companion couldn't tell in that dim starlight. They had left the village behind them, and were out on the breezy common.

"And my lady," the artist asked—"any news from her?"

"Not a word. She came down to dinner beautifully dressed, but white as the snow lying yonder. She and Sir Everard dined *tête-à-tête*. I take my meals with the housekeeper now"—smiling bitterly. "My Lady Kingsland doesn't like me. The butler told me they did not speak six words during the whole time of dinner."

"Both in the sulks," said Mr. Parmalee. "Well, it's natural. He's dying to know, and she'll be torn to pieces afore she breathes a word. She's that sort. But this shyn' and holdin' off won't do with *me*. I'm getting tired of waiting, and—and so's another party up in London. Tell her so, Sybilla, with G. W. P.'s compliments, and say I say that I give her just two more days, and if she doesn't come to book before the end of that time, I'll sell her secret to the highest bidder."

"Yes!" Sybilla said, breathlessly. "And now for that secret, George."

"You won't tell?" cried Mr. Parmalee, a little alarmed at this precipitation. "Say you won't—never—so help you!"

"Never—I swear it. Now go on!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A STORM BREWING.

The fever of love, the fever of jealousy, like other chills and fevers, have their hot spells and their cold ones. Sir Everard Kingsland

was blazing in the very hottest of the flame when he tore himself forcibly away from the artist, and buried himself in his study. The unutterable degradation of it all, the horrible humiliation, that this man and his wife—his—were bound together by some mysterious secret, nearly drove him mad.

"Where there is mystery there *must* be guilt!" he fiercely thought. "Nothing under heaven can make it right for a wife to have a secret from her husband. And she knew it and concealed it before she married me. She deliberately deceived me, and means to deceive me until the end. In a week her name and that of this low-bred ruffian will be bandied together throughout the country. Good heavens, the thought is enough to drive me mad!"

And then, like a mad man indeed, he tore up and down the apartment, his hands clenched, his face ghastly, his eyes bloodshot. And then—oh, strange and incomprehensible insanity of passion!—all doubts and fears were swept away, and Love rushed back in an impetuous torrent, and he *knew* that to lose her were ten thousand times worse than death.

"My beautiful—my own—my darling! May Heaven pity us both, for be your secret what it may, I *cannot* lose you—I *cannot*! Life without you were tenfold worse than the bitterest death. My own poor girl! I know she suffers, too, for this miserable secret, this sin of others—for such it must be. She looked up in my face with truthful, innocent eyes, and told me she never saw this man until she met him that day in the library, and I *know* she spoke the truth. My love—my wife—you asked me to trust you, and I thrust you aside. I spoke and acted like a brute. I *will* trust you. I *will* wait. I will never doubt you again, my own beloved bride!"

And then, in a paroxysm of love and remorse, the young husband strode out of the library and up stairs to his wife's room. He found her alone, sitting by the window, in her loose white morning robe, a book lying idly on her knee, herself whiter than the dress she wore.

"My love—my life!" He had her in his strong arms, strained to his breast as if he never meant to let her go. "My own dear Harrie! Can you ever forgive me for the brutal words I used—for the brutal way I acted?"

She gave a low cry of joy, and sank down on his breast with a look of such infinite love and thankfulness that it haunted him to his dying day.

"My Everard—my beloved husband—my darling, my darling! You are not—you

will not be angry with your poor little Harrie?"

"I could not, my life! What is the world worth to us if we cannot love and trust? I do love you, Heaven alone knows how well! I will trust you, though all the world should rise up against you!"

Again that cry of joy—again that clinging, straining clasp.

"Thank Heaven—thank Heaven! Everard, dearest, I cannot tell you—I cannot—how miserable I have been! If I lost your love I should die! Trust me, my husband! Trust me—love me! I have no one left in the world but you!"

She broke down in a wild storm of womanly weeping. He held her in silence—the hysterics did her good. He only knew that he loved her with a passionate, consuming love, and not ten million secrets could keep them apart.

Presently she raised her head and looked at him, very pale, and with wild, wide eyes of fear.

"Everard, have you—have you seen *that man*?"

His heart contracted with a sudden, sharp pang, but he strove to restrain himself and be calm.

"Parmalee? Yes, Harrie; I left him not an hour ago."

"And he—Everard, for Heaven's sake!"

Her white lips refused to finish the sentence.

"He told me nothing, Harrie;" and the bitterness of his heart tinged his voice in spite of himself. "You and he keep your secrets well. He told me nothing, and he is gone. He will never come back here more."

He looked at her keenly, suspiciously, as he said it. Alas, the intermittent fever was taking its hot fit again! But she dropped her face on his shoulder and hid it.

"Has he left the village, Everard?"—very faintly.

"I cannot say. I only know I have forbidden this place," he replied, in a hard, wrung voice. "Harrie, Harrie, my little wife! You are very merciless! You are torturing me, and I—I would die to save you an instant's pain!"

At that eloquent cry she slipped out of his arms and fell on her knees before him, her clasped hands hiding her face.

"May Heaven grant me a short life!" was her frenzied cry; "for I never can tell you—never, Everard, not on my dying bed—the secret I have sworn to keep."

"Sworn to keep!" It flashed upon him like a revelation. "Sworn to *whom*? To your father, Harrie?"

"Do not ask me! I can tell you nothing—

I dare not! I am bound by an awful vow! And, oh, I think I am the most wretched creature in the wide world!"

He raised her up; he kissed the white, despairing face again and again—a rain of rapturous kisses. A ton weight seemed suddenly lifted off his heart.

"I see it all," he cried—"I see it all now! Fool that I was not to understand sooner. There was some mystery—some guilt, perhaps—in Captain Hunsden's life, and he revealed it to you on his death-bed, and made you swear to keep his secret. Am I not right?"

She did not look up. He could feel her shivering from head to foot.

"Yes, Everard."

"And this man—this American—has in some way found it out, and wishes to trade upon it—to extort money from you? I have often heard of such things. Am I right again?"

"Yes, Everard"—very faint and sad.

"Then, my own dearest, leave me to deal with him; see him and fear him no more. I will seek him out. I will not ask to know it. I will pay him his price, and send him about his business."

He rose impetuously as he spoke, eager to rid himself of his incubus on the spot. But Harriet clung to him with a strange, wild look on her face.

"No, no, no!" she cried. "It would not do. You could not satisfy him. You don't know"—She stopped distractedly. "Oh, Everard, I can't explain. You are all kindness, all generosity, all goodness; but I must settle with this man myself. Don't go near him—don't ask to see him. It could do no good."

He withdrew himself from her, freeing to marble at once.

"I am not right, then, after all. The secret is yours, not your father's?"

"Do not ask me! If the sin is not mine, the atonement—the bitter atonement—is, at least, Everard, look at me—see! I love you with all my heart. I would not tell you a lie. I never committed a deed, I never indulged a thought of my own you are not free to know. I never saw this man until that day in the library. Oh, believe this, and trust me, and don't ask me to break my oath!"

"I will not." He bent over her with unutterable love, and kissed the beautiful, pleading face. "I believe you—I trust you. I ask no more. Get rid of this man, and be happy once again. We will not even talk of it longer; and—will you come with me to my mother's, Harrie? I dine there, you know, to-day."

"My headaches. Not to-day, I think. What time will you return?"

"Before ten," He pulled out his watch. "And as I have a little magisterial business to transact down in the village, it is time I was off. Adieu, my own love! Forget the harsh words, and be my own happy, radiant, beautiful bride once more!"

She lifted her face and smiled—a smile as wan and fleeting as moonlight on snow. And then they had parted—to look into each other's eyes no more in love and trust for a dark and tragic time.

Sir Everard hastened to his room to dress, striving with all his might to drive every suspicion out of his mind.

And she—she flung herself on the sofa, face downward, and lay there as if she never cared to rise again.

"Papa, papa," she sailed, "what have you done—what have you done?"

All that day Lady Kingsland kept her room. Her maid brought her what she wanted. Sir Everard returned at the appointed hour, looking gloomy and downcast.

His evening at his mother's had not been a pleasant one—that was evident. Perhaps some vague hint of the darkening mystery had already reached The Grange.

"My mother feels rather hurt, Harrie," he said, somewhat coldly, "that you did not accompany me. She is unable to call on you, owing to a severe cold. Mildred is absorbed in waiting upon her, and desires to see you exceedingly. I promised them we would both dine there to-morrow, and spend the evening."

His tone admitted of no refusal. But Harrie was too spiritless and worn to offer any.

"As you please, Everard," she said, wearily. "It is all the same to me."

She descended to breakfast next morning, carefully dressed, to meet the fastidious eye of her husband. But she ate nothing. A gloomy presentiment of impending evil weighed down her heart like lead. Her husband made little effort to rouse her—the contagious gloom affected him too.

"It is the weather, I daresay," he remarked, looking out at the bleak, wintry day, the leaden sky, the wailing wind. "The February gloom is enough to give a man the megrims. I must face it, too; for to-day I 'meet the captains at the citadel'—that is to say, I promised to ride over to Major Warden's about noon. You will be ready, Harrie, when I return, to accompany me to The Grange?"

She promised, and he departed; and then, with a slow and weary step, Lady Kingsland ascended to her own apartment.

While she stood there, gazing blankly out at the grey desolation of the February morning, there was a soft tap at the door.

"Come in," she said, thinking if her maid; and the door opened and Sybilla Silver, shod with the shoes of silence, entered.

Lady Kingsland faced round and looked at her. How handsome she was! That was her first involuntary thought. Her sweeping black robes fell round her tall, regal figure with queenly grace; the black eyes sparkled with living light; a more vivid scarlet than usual lit up each dusky cheek. She looked gloriously beautiful, standing there. Mr. Parmalee would surely have been dazzled had he seen her.

There was a moment's pause. The two women eyed each other, as accomplished swordsmen may on the eve of a duel. Very pale, very proud, looked my lady. She disliked and distrusted this brilliant, black-eyed Miss Silver, and Miss Silver knew it well.

"You wish to speak with me, Miss Silver?" my lady said, in her most superb manner.

"Yes, my lady—most particularly, and quite alone. I beg your pardon, but your maid is not within hearing, I trust?"

"We are quite alone"—very coldly. "Speak out; no one can overhear you."

"I do not care for myself," Sybilla said, her glittering black eyes meeting the proud grey ones. "It is for *your* sake, my lady."

"For my sake!"—in haughty amaze. "You can have nothing to say to me, Miss Silver, the whole world may not overhear. If you intend to be impertinent, I shall order you out of the room."

"One moment, my lady. You go too fast! The whole world may *not* overhear the message Mr. Parmalee sends you by me."

"Ah!"—my lady recoiled as though an adder had stung her—"always that man! Speak out, then"—turning fiercely upon her husband's protégée. "What is the message this man sends me by you?"

"That if you do not meet him within two days, he will sell your secret to the highest bidder."

Sybilla delivered, word for word, the message of the American—cruelly, slowly, significantly—looking her still straight in the eyes. Those clear, grey eyes flashed with a fierce, defiant light.

"You know all!" she cried.

Sybilla Silver bowed her head.

"I know all," she answered.

Dead silence fell. White as a dead woman, Lady Kingsland stood, her eyes ablaze with fierce, consuming fire. Sybilla made a step forward, sank down before her, and lifted her hand to her lips.

"He told me all, dear lady; but your secret is safe with me. Sybilla will be your true and faithful, though humble, friend, if you will let

her. Dear Lady Kingsland, don't look at me with that stony, angry face. I have no wish but to serve you."

The gracious speech met with but an ungracious return. My lady snatched her hand away as though from a snake, and gazed at her with flashing eyes of scorn and distrust.

"What are you to this man, Miss Silver?" she asked. "Why should he tell you?"

"I am his plighted wife," replied Sybilla, trying to call up a conscious blush.

"Ah, I see," my lady said, scornfully. "Permit me to congratulate you on the excellent execution your black eyes have wrought. You are a very clever girl, Miss Silver, and I think I understand you thoroughly. I am only surprised you did not carry your discovery straight to Sir Everard Kingsland."

"Your ladyship is most unjust," Sybilla said, turning away—"unkind and cruel. I have delivered my message, and I will go."

"Wait one moment," my lady said, in her clear, sweet voice, her proud face gleaming with a cynical smile. "To-morrow evening it will be impossible for me to see Mr. Parmalee—there is to be a dinner party at the house—during the day still more impossible. Since he commands me to see him, I will do so to-night, and throw over my other engagements. At eight this evening I will be in the Beech Walk, and alone. Let Mr. Parmalee come to me there."

A gleam of diabolical triumph lit up the great black eyes of Sybilla, but the profound bow she made concealed it.

"I will tell him, my lady," she said, "and he will be there without fail."

She quitted the room, closed the door, and looked back at it as Satan may have looked back at Eden after vanquishing Eve.

"My triumph begins," she said to herself. "I have caught you nicely this time, my lady. You and Mr. Parmalee will not be alone in the Beech Walk to-night."

Left to herself, Harriet stood for a moment motionless. With all her pride and her strength gone, she sank down into a seat, her hands clasped over her heart.

"She, too," she murmured—my arch-enemy! Oh, Heaven, help me to bear it—help me to keep the horrible truth from the husband I love! *She* will not tell him—she knows he would never endure her from the hour she would make the revelation, and that thought alone restrains her. It will kill me—this agonizing fear and horror! And better so—better to die now, whilst he loves me, than live to be hated and loathed when he discovers the truth."

Sir Everard Kingsland, riding home in the yellow wintry sunset, found my lady lying on a lounge in her boudoir, her maid beside her, bathing her forehead with eau-de-cologne. His brow contracted with a little spasm of disappointment.

"Headache again, Harrie?" he said. "You are growing a complete martyr to that feminine malady of late. I had hoped to find you dressed, and ready to accompany me to The Grange."

"I am sorry, Everard, but this evening it is impossible. Make my excuses to her ladyship, and tell her I hope to see her soon."

She did not look up as she said it, and her husband, stooping, imprinted a kiss on the colourless cheek.

"My poor pale girl! I will send Edwards with an apology to The Grange, and remain at home with you."

"No!" Harriet cried hastily. "Not on any account. You must not disappoint your mother, Everard—you must go. There, goodbye! It is time you were dressing. Don't mind me. I shall be better when you return."

But he lingered still, with a strangely yearning, troubled face.

"I feel as though I ought not to leave you to-night," he said. "It seems heartless, and you ill. I had better send Edwards and the apology."

"You foolish boy!" She looked up at him and smiled, with eyes full of tears. "I shall be better alone and quiet. Sleep and solitude will restore me. Go, go! You will be late as it is, and my lady dislikes being kept waiting."

He kissed her and went, casting one long, lingering backward look at the wife he loved. And with a pang bitter than death came the remembrance afterwards of how she had urged him to leave her that night.

Sybilla Silver, standing by the house door, was gazing out at the yellow February sun, sinking pale and watery into the livid horizon line, as the baronet ran down stairs, drawing on his gloves. He paused, with his usual courtesy, to speak to his dependant as he went by.

"The sky yonder looks ominous," he said, "and this wailing, icy blast is the very desolation of desolation. There is a storm brewing."

Miss Silver's black eyes gleamed, and her white teeth showed in a sinister smile.

"A storm?" she repeated. "Yes, I think there is, and you will be caught in it, Sir Everard, if you stay late. The storm will break very soon."

CHAPTER XXII.

A NIGHT IN THE BEECH WALK.

The instant Sir Everard was out of sight, Sybilla ran up to her chamber, and presently reappeared dressed for a walk.

Even the long, shrouding mantle she wore could not disguise the exquisite symmetry of her graceful form, and the thick, brown veil could not dim the lustre of her flashing Assyrian eyes. She smiled back, before flitting away, at the dark-bright, sparkling face her mirror showed her.

"You are a very pretty person, my dear Miss Silver," she said—"prettier even than my lady herself, though I say it. Worlds have been lost for less handsome faces than this in the glorious days gone by, and Mr. Parmalee will have every reason to be proud of his wife—when he gets her."

She ran lightly down stairs, a sarcastic smile still on her lips. In the lower hall stood Mr. Edwards, the valet, disconsolately gazing at the threatening prospect. He turned round, and his dull eyes lit up at sight of this vision of beauty; for Mr. Parmalee was by no means the only gentleman with the good taste to admire handsome Sybilla.

"Going out, Miss Silver?" Mr. Edwards asked, in languid surprise. "Uncommon urgent your business must be to take you from home such an evening as this. How's my lady?"

"My lady is not at all well, Mr. Edwards," answered Sybilla. "Sir Everard was obliged to go alone to his mother's, my lady's headache is so intense. Claudine is with her, I believe. We are going to have a storm, are we not? I shall be obliged to hurry back."

She flitted away as she spoke, drawing down her veil, and disappearing whilst yet Mr. Edwards was dying to make a languid proffer of his services as escort. He lounged easily up against the window, gazing with calm admiration after her.

"An uncommon, handsome and lady-looking young pusson that," reflected Sir Everard's gentleman. "I shouldn't mind asking her to be Mrs. Edwards one of these days. That face of hers, and them dashing ways, would take elegantly behind the bar of a public."

Unconscious of the admiration she was eliciting in the bosom of Mr. Edwards, Sybilla sped on her way down the village to the Blue Bell. Just before she reached the inn she encountered Mr. Parmalee himself taking a constitutional, a cigar in his mouth, and his hands deep in his trousers pockets. He met and greeted his fair betrothed with natural plegm.

"How do, Sybilla?" nodding and smoking steadily on. "I kind of thought you'd be after me, and so I stepped out. You've been and delivered that there little message of mine, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Sybilla, "and she will meet you to-night in the Beech Walk, and hear what you have got to say."

"The deuce she will!" said the artist; "and have her fire-eating husband catch us, and set the flunkies at me! Not if I know myself. If my lady wants to hear what I've got to say, let my lady come to me."

"She never will!" responded Sybilla. "You don't know her. Don't be an idiot, George—do as she requests. Meet her to-night in the Beech Walk."

"And have the baronet come upon us, like a roaring lion, in the middle of our confab! Look here, Sybilla. I ain't a cowardly feller, you know, in the main; but, by George, it ain't pleasant to be horsewhipped by an outrageous young baronet, or kicked from the gates by his understrappers."

"There is no danger. Sir Everard is not at home, and will not be before ten o'clock at least. He is gone to dine at the Orange with his mother; and my lady was to have gone too, but your message frightened her, and she told him little white lies, and insisted on him going by himself. And, you silly old stupid, if you had two ideas in your head you would see that this opportunity of braving his express command, and entering the lions' den to meet his wife by night and by stealth, is the most glorious opportunity of revenge you could have. Sir Everard is nearly mad with jealousy and suspicion already. What will he be when he finds his wife of a month has lied to him, to meet you alone and in secret at the Beech Walk? I tell you, Mr. Parmalee, you will be gloriously avenged."

"By thunder!" cried the artist, "I never thought of that! I'll do it, Sybilla—I'll do it, so help me! Tell my lady I'll be there, right to the minute; and do you take care that confounded, conceited baronet finds it out. I said I'd pay him off for every blow, and I'll do it, by Jove!"

"And strike through her!" hissed Sybilla, with glittering black eyes; "and every blow will go straight through the core of his proud heart. We'll torture him, George Parmalee, as man never was tortured before!"

Mr. Parmalee looked at her, rather taken aback, as he always was when she burst out with the deadly inward fire that filled her.

"What a little devil you are, Sybilla!" he said, with lover-like candour. "I've heard tell that you women knock us men into a cocked

hat, in the way of hating, and I now begin to think it is true. What has this here baronet done to *you*, I should like to know? You don't hate him like the old serpent for nothing."

"What has he done to me!" repeated Sybilla, with a strange, slow smile. "*That* is easily told. He gave me a home when I was homeless—he was my friend when I was friendless. I have broken his bread, and drank of his cup, and slept under his roof, and—I hate him—I hate him!"

Her hands and teeth clenched in a deadly spasm of suppressed fury; her eyes blazed like lurid flames. Mr. Parmalee took his cigar out of his mouth, and stared at her in horror.

"I tell you what it is, Miss Silver," he said, after an aghast pause, "I don't like this sort of thing—I don't, by George! I ain't surprised at a person hating a person, because I hate him myself; but for a young woman that is going to be my wife to cut up like this here, and swear everlasting vengeance—well, I don't like it. You see, wild cats ain't the most comfortable sort of pets a man can have in his house, and how do I know but it may be *my* turn next?"

Miss Silver laughed, and her face cleared instantly. She laid her hand on his arm, and looked up in his face with shining, bewitching eyes.

"You precious old stupid! As if I *could* hate you, if I tried! No, no, George—you may trust Sybilla. The wild-cat will sheathe her claws in triple folds of velvet for you."

"Humph," said Mr. Parmalee, "*but the claws will be still there*. However, I ain't a-going to quarrel with you about it. I like a plucky woman, and I hate *him*. I'll meet my lady to-night, and you see that my lady's husband finds it out."

"Until then," responded Sybilla, folding her mantle closer about her; "remember the hour—sharp eight—and don't keep her waiting. Before he sleeps to-night, the proudest baronet in the realm shall know why his wife deliberately deceived him to meet a strange man by night and by stealth, in the park, where her husband had ordered him never to set foot again."

She fluttered away in the chill spring twilight with the last words, leaving her *fiancée* gazing after her with an expression that was not altogether unmixed with admiration.

"I'm blessed if I ever met the like of *you*, Miss Silver, in all my travels. You might be own sister to Lucifer himself for wickedness and revengefulness. I'll find out what's at the bottom of all this cantankerous spite before I make you Mrs. G. W. Parmalee, or I'll

know the reason why. It's all very fine to have a handsome wife with big black eyes and plenty of spirit, but a fellow doesn't want a wife that will bury the carving-knife in him the first time he contradicts her."

Sybilla was a good walker; the last yellow line of the watery February sunset had hardly faded as she tripped up the long drive under the gaunt, tossing trees. Mr. Edwards still lounged in elegant leisure in the hall, conversing with a gigantic young footman, and his fishy eyes kindled for the second time as Sybilla appeared, flushed and bright and sparkling after her windy, twilight walk.

"I have outstripped the storm, after all, you see," she remarked, with a gay little laugh, as she went by. "I don't believe we shall have it before midnight. Oh, Claudine, is my lady in her room? I have been on an errand for her down the village."

She had encountered the jaunty little French girl on the upper landing, and paused to put the question.

"Yes," Claudine said. "Madame's headache was easier. She was reading in her dressing-room."

Sybilla tapped at the dressing-room door, then turned the handle and entered. It was an exquisite little boudoir of a chamber, with fluted walls of rose-silk, and delicious, plump beauties, with bare shoulders and melting eyes, by Greuze.

The flickering blaze of the fire and the ghostly twilight creeping greyly in between the rosy silken curtains, left the room in a fantastic mixture of light and shadow.

Leaning back in an arm-chair, her book lying aimlessly on her lap, her dark, deep eyes looking straight before her into the evening gloaming, my lady sat alone.

The melancholy wash of the waves on the shore, the mournful sighing of the evening wind among the groaning trees, the monotonous ticking of a dainty buhl clock, and the light fall of the cinders sounded abnormally loud in the dead silence of the apartment.

Lady Kingsland turned round at the opening of the door, and her face hardened into that fixedly cold, proud look it always wore at sight of her husband's brilliant protégée.

In her trailing black robes Miss Silver stood before her, in the mysterious half-light, like some tall, dark ghost.

"I have been to the village, my lady," Sybilla said. "I have seen Mr. Parmalee. He will be in the Beech Walk precisely at eight."

My lady bent her head in cold acknowledgment. Sybilla paused an instant, determined to make her speak.

"Can I be of service to you in any way in this matter, my lady?" she asked.

"You!"—in proud surprise. "Certainly not. I wish to be alone, Miss Silver. Be good enough to go."

Sybilla's little brown fist clenched itself furiously, once on the landing outside.

"I can't humble her," she thought. "I can't make her fear me. I can't triumph over her, do what I will. I have her secret, and I hold her in my power, but she is prouder than Lucifer himself, and she would let me stand forth and tell all, and if one pleading word would stop me, she would not say it. 'The brave may die, but cannot yield.' She should have been a man."

She went to the window and drew out her watch. It wanted a quarter to eight. The pretty little enamelled trinket had been a recent gift of the princely young baronet—her initials glittered on the case; but, preparing to stab him to the heart, she looked at it without one compunctious twinge.

"In fifteen minutes my lady goes; in fifteen more I shall follow her—and not alone. I am afraid Sir Everard's slumbers will be rather disturbed to-night."

The last yellow gleam of the dying day was gone, and a sickly, pallid moon glimmered dully among drifts of scudding black clouds. An icy blast wailed up from the sea, and the rocking trees were, like Dryad spectres, in writhing agony. The distant Beech Walk looked black, and grim, and ghostly in the weird light.

A great clock, high up in the windy turret, struck eight. A moment later the door of my lady's dressing-room opened—a dark, shrouded figure emerged, flitted swiftly down the long gallery, down the sweeping stairway, and vanished.

Sybilla Silver stood like an effigy in stone, listening, with a smile on her lips; and her smile was the smile of a demon!

Ten minutes later Edwards, yawning forlornly, still in the entrance hall, beheld Miss Silver coming towards him with an anxious face, a large shawl thrown over her head.

"Going out again!" the valet exclaimed. "And such a nasty night too! You are fond of walking, Miss S., and no mistake."

"I'm not going for a walk," said Sybilla. "I am going to look for a locket I lost this afternoon. I was out in the park, in the direction of the Beech Walk, and there I must have dropped it."

"Better wait until to-morrow," suggested Edwards. "The wind's howling through the trees, and it's colder than the Arctic regions. Better wait."

"I cannot. The locket was a present, and I value it exceedingly. I thought of asking you to accompany me, Mr. Edwards, but as it is so cold, perhaps you had better not."

"Oh, I'll go with pleasure!" said Mr. Edwards. "If you can stand the cold, I can, I dessay. Wait till I get my hat and overcoat—I won't be a minute."

Miss Silver waited. Mr. Edwards reappeared in a twinkling.

"Haden't I better fetch a lantern?" he suggested. "It will be impossible to see it, even if it should be there."

"No," said Sybilla. "The moon is shining, and the locket will glimmer on the snow. Come!"

She took his arm, and they started at a brisk pace for the Beech Walk. The ground, baked hard as iron, rang under their tread, and, whether it was the bitter blast or not, Mr. Edwards could not tell, but his companion's face was flushed with a more brilliant glow than he had ever before seen there in the ghostly moonlight.

They reached the long grove of magnificent copper beeches, and just without its entrance Miss Silver began searching for her lost locket. The white snow was baked and glittering, but no shining wheel of gold sparkled on its radiant surface.

"It is not here," said Sybilla. "Let us go further down"—

She paused abruptly at a sudden gesture of her companion.

"Hush!" he said. "There is some one talking in the Beech Walk."

Both paused and stood stock still. Borne unmistakably on the night wind voices came to them—the soft voice of a woman, the deeper tones of a man.

"One of the maids, I daresay," Sybilla said, carelessly,—"holding tryst with her lover."

"No," said the valet; "not one of the maids would set foot inside this walk after nightfall for a kingdom. They say it's haunted. Come forward a little, and let's see if we can't have a look at the talkers. Whoever it is, he's up to no good, I'll be bound."

Very softly, stealing on tip-toe, the twain approached the entrance of the avenue. The watery moonlight, breaking through a rift in the clouds, shone out for an instant above the trees, and showed them a man and a woman, standing face to face, earnestly talking. The man stood leaning against a tree, his hat pulled over his face—the woman stood before him, the dim light full upon her. Mr. Edwards barely repressed a cry of consternation.

"Good lord!" he gasped—"it's my lady!"

"Hush!" cried Sybilla, in a fierce whisper. "Who is the man?"

As if some inward prescience told him they were there, the man lifted his hat at that very instant, and plainly showed his face.

"The American, by Jove!" again gasped the horrified valet; and then he stood staring speechlessly.

Sybilla Silver's eyes blazed like coals of fire, and the demoniac smile, that made her brilliant beauty hideous, gleamed on her lips.

She grasped the man's arm with slender fingers of iron, and stood gloating over the scene.

Not one word could they hear—the distance was too great; but they could see my lady's passionate gestures; they could see the white hands clasp and cover her face; they could see her wildly excited, even in that dim light. And once they saw her take from her pocket her purse, and pour a handful of shining sovereigns into Mr. Parmalee's extended hand.

There was a speechless gasp from Mr. Edwards at this awful revelation—he was too far gone for words.

They stood there while the moments went, unheeding the icy wind that arose and blew more fiercely each instant—unheeding the few fluttering snowflakes beginning to fall.

Nearly an hour they had stood, petrified gazers, when they were aroused as by a thunder-clap. A horse came galloping furiously up the avenue, as only *one* rider ever galloped there. Sybilla Silver just repressed a scream of exultation—no more.

"It is Sir Everard Kingsland," she cried, in a whisper of fierce delight, "in time to catch his sick wife in the Beech Walk with the man he hates!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

MY LADY'S SECRET.

It was quite dark before prudent Mr. Parmalee, notwithstanding Sybilla's assurance that the baronet was away from home, ventured within the great entrance gates of the park. He was not, as he said himself, a coward altogether, but he had a lively recollection of the pummelling he had already received, and a wholesome dread of the scientific hitting of this strong-fisted young baronet. When he did venture, his coat-collar was so pulled down that in the sickly rays of the moon recognition, even had they met, was next to impossible.

Mr. Parmalee, smoking a cigar, made his way to the Beech Walk, and, leaning against a giant tree, stared at the watery moon and

waited. The loud-voiced turret clock struck eight a moment after he had taken up his position.

"Time is up," thought the photographer. "My lady ought to be here now. I'll give her another quarter. If she isn't with me in that time, then good-bye to Kingsland and my keeping her secret."

Ten minutes passed. As he replaced his watch a light step sounded on the frozen snow, a shadow darkened the entrance, and Lady Kingsland's pale, proud face looked fixedly at him in the moonlight. There was a queenliness in her manner that impressed even the unimpressible American. He took off his hat, and threw away his half-smoked cigar.

"My Lady Kingsland."

She bowed haughtily, hovering aloof.

"You wished to see me, Mr. Parmalee—that is your name, I believe? What is it you have to say to me?"

Her proud tone restored all the artist's constitutional phlegm. He put on his hat, and returned her haughty gaze coolly.

"I don't think you really need to ask that question, my lady. You know as well as I do, or I'm mistaken."

"Who are you?" she demanded, impatiently, impetuously. "How do you come to know my secret? How do you come to be possessed of that picture?"

"I told you before. She gave it to me herself."

My lady's great grey eyes dilated. She came a step nearer.

"For Heaven's sake, tell me the truth! Don't deceive me. Do you really mean it? Have you really seen my"—

She stopped, shuddering in some horrible inward repulsion from head to foot.

"I really have," rejoined Mr. Parmalee. "I know the—the party in question like a book. She told me her story, she gave me her picture herself, of her own free will, and she told me where to find you. She is in London now, all safe, and waiting—a little out of patience, though, by this time, I dare say."

"Waiting!" Lady Kingsland gasped the word in white terror. "Waiting for what?"

"To see you, my lady."

There was a blank pause. My lady covered her face with both hands, and again that convulsive shudder shook her from head to foot.

"She is very penitent, my lady," Mr. Parmalee said, in a softer tone. "She is very poor, and ill, and heart-broken. Even you, my lady, might pity and forgive her if you saw her now."

She made a wild, frantic gesture for him to

stop. In the moonlight her face was utterly ghastly.

"For Heaven's sake, hush! I don't want to hear. Tell me how you met her first. I never heard your name until that day in the library."

"No more you didn't," said the artist. "You see, my lady, it was pure chance-work from first to last. I was coming over to England on a little speculation of my own in the photographic line, and being low in pocket and pretty well used to rough it, I was coming in the steerage. There was a pretty hard crowd of us—Dutch and Irish and all sorts mixed up there—and among 'em one that looked as much out of her element as a fish out of water. Any one could tell with half an eye she'd been a lady, in spite of her shabby clothes and starved, haggard face. She was alone. Not a soul knew her—not a soul cared for her; and half way across she fell ill and was like to die."

Mr. Parmalee paused. My lady stood before him, ashen white to the lips, listening with wild, wide eyes.

"Go on," she said, almost in a whisper.

"Well, my lady," Mr. Parmalee resumed, modestly, "I'm a pretty rough sort of fellow, as you may see, and I hain't never experienced religion or that, and don't lay claim to no sort of goodness, but for all that I've an old mother over at home, and for her sake I couldn't stand by and see a poor, sufferin' fellow critter of the female persuasion and not lend a helping hand. I nussed that there sick party by night and by day, and if it hadn't been for that nussin' and the little things I bought her to eat, she'd have been under the Atlantic now, though I do say it. They used to laugh at me on board, but I stuck to her until she got well."

My lady held out her hand—her slender white hand, a-glitter with rich rings.

"You are a better man than I took you for," she said, softly. "I thank you with all my heart."

Mr. Parmalee took the dainty hand rather confusedly in his finger-tips, held it a second, and then dropped it.

"It was one night, when she thought herself dying, that she told me her story—told me everything, my lady—who she had been, who she was, and what she was coming across for. My lady, nobody could be sorrier than she was then. I pitied her, by George! more than I ever pitied any one before in my life. She had been unhappy and remorseful for a long time, but she was in despair. It was too late for repentance, she thought; there was nothing for it but to go on to the dreadful end. Sometimes, when she was almost mad, she—well,

she took to drink, you know, and he wasn't in any way a good or kind protector to her—Thorndyke wasn't."

My lady flung up both arms, with a shrill, irrepressible scream.

"Not that name," she cried—"not that accursed name, if you would not drive me mad!"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Parmalee; "I won't. Well, she heard of your father's death—he told her, you see—and that completed her despair. She took to drink worse and worse; she got out of all bounds—sort of frantic, you see. Twice she tried to kill herself—once by poison, once by drowning—and both times he (you know who I mean) caught her and stopped her. He hadn't even mercy enough on her, she says, to let her die!"

"For Heaven's sake, don't tell me of those horrors!" my lady cried, in a voice of agony. "I feel as though I were going mad!"

"It's hard," said the artist, compassionately; "but I can't help it—it's true, all the same. She heard of your marriage to Sir Everard Kingsland next. It was the last thing he ever taunted her with; for, crazed with his jeers and insults, she fled from him that night—sold all she possessed but the clothes on her back, and took passage for England."

"To see me?" asked Harriet, hoarsely.

"To see you, my lady, but all unknown. She had no wish to force herself upon you; she only felt that she was dying, and that if she could look on your face once before she went out of life, and see you well, and beautiful, and beloved, and happy, she could lie down in the dust at your gates and die content."

There was a rude pathos in the speaker's voice that showed even he was touched. For my lady, she hid her face once more, and the tears fell like rain.

"She made me write you a line or two that night," continued Mr. Parmalee—"that night which she thought her last—and she begged me to find you and give it to you with her picture. I have it yet. Here they are, both."

He drew from his pocket the picture and a note, and gave them into my lady's hand.

"She didn't die," he resumed. "She got better, and I took her to London—left her there, and came down here. Now, my lady, I don't make no pretence of being better than I am. I took this matter up in the way of speculation—in the view to make money out of it, and nothing else—I said to myself, 'Here's this young lady, the bride of a rich baronet. It ain't likely she's been and told him all this, and it ain't likely her pa has died and left her

ignorant of it. Now, what's to hinder my making a few honest pounds out of it, at the same time I do a good turn for this poor, sufferin', sinful critter here?" That's what I said, my lady, and that's what I'm here for. I'm a poor man, and I live by my wits, and a stroke of business is a stroke of business, no matter how far it's out of the ordinary run. Your husband don't know this here story. You don't want him to know it, and you come down handsomely, and I keep your secret."

"You have rather spoiled your marketable commodity, then, Mr. Parmalee. It would have paid you better not to have shared your secret with Sybilla Silver."

"She's told you, has she?" said the artist, rather surprised. "Now, that's what I call mean. You don't think she'll peach to Sir Everard, do you?"

"I think it extremely likely that she will. She hates me, Mr. Parmalee, and Miss Silver would do a good deal for a person she hates. You should have waited until she became Mrs. Parmalee before making her the repository of your valuable secrets."

"It's no good talking about it now, however," said Mr. Parmalee, rather doggedly. "I've told her, and it can't be helped. And now, my lady, I don't want to be caught here, and it's getting late, and what are you going to give a fellow for all his trouble?"

"What will hardly repay you, I fear," said my lady, with cold contempt; "for I have very little of my own, as you doubtless have informed yourself ere this. What I have you have earned, and shall receive. At the most it will not exceed three hundred pounds. Of my husband's money not one farthing shall any one ever receive from me for keeping a secret of mine."

Mr. Parmalee's face fell visibly. Three hundred pounds was evidently not one-fourth of what he had expected to receive for his secret.

"I must have more than that," he said, resolutely. "Three hundred pounds is nothing to a lady like you. You have diamonds and jewels worth five times the amount. I must have more than three hundred pounds."

"It is all I have—all I can give you—and to give you that I must sell the trinkets my dear dead father gave me. But it is for *his* sake I do it—to preserve his secret. My jewels, my diamonds, my husband's gifts I will not touch, not one farthing of his money will you ever receive. You entirely mistake me, Mr. Parmalee. My secret I will keep from him whilst I can—I swore a solemn oath by my father's death-bed to do so—but to pay you with *his* money, to bribe you to deceive him with *his* gold, I never will. I would die first."

She stood before him erect, defiant, queenly.

Mr. Parmalee frowned darkly.

"Suppose I go to him, then, my lady—suppose I pour this nice little story into his ear—what then?"

"Then," she exclaimed, in tones of ringing scorn, "you will receive nothing! His servants will thrust you from his gates. No, Mr. Parmalee, if money be your object, you will make a better bargain with me than with him. What is mine you shall have—every farthing I own, every trinket I possess—on condition that you depart and never trouble me more. That is all I can do—all I will do! Decide which you prefer."

"There is no choice," replied the American, sullenly; "half a loaf is better than nothing. I'll take the three hundred pounds, but it's a poorer spec than I took it for. And now, my lady, what do you mean to do about *her*? She wants to see you."

"See me!"—an expression of horror, fear, disgust swept over my lady's face. "Not for ten thousand worlds!"

"Well, now, I call that hard," said Mr. Parmalee. "I don't care what she's done, or what she's been, it's *hard*. She's sorry now, and no one can be more than that. I take an interest in that unfortunate party, my lady; and if you knew how she hankers after a sight of you—how poor, and ill, and heartbroken she is—how she longs to hear you say once, 'I forgive you,' before she dies—well, you wouldn't, proud as you are—you wouldn't be so hard."

"Stop—stop!" Lady Kingsland exclaimed, in a choking voice.

She turned away, leaning against a tree, her hands pressed over her heart, her face more ghastly than the face of a dead woman.

Mr. Parmalee watched her. He could see the fierce struggle that shook her from head to foot.

"Don't be hard on her," he pleaded; "she's very humble now, and fallen very low. She won't live long, and you'll be happier on your own death-bed, my lady, for forgiving her, poor soul!"

She put out her hand blindly, and took his. Her touch was icy cold, her face ghastly.

"I will see her," she said, hoarsely. "May God forgive her, and pity me! Fetch her down here, Mr. Parmalee, and I will see her."

"Yes, my lady; but as I'm rather short of funds, perhaps"—

She drew out her purse and poured its glittering contents into his palm.

"It is all I have now. When you return I will have the three hundred pounds. You must take her back to New York; she and I

must never meet again—for my husband's sake."

"I understand, my lady," the man said, moved by the agony of her voice. "I'll do what I can. I'll take her back, and I'll trouble you no more."

His last words were drowned in the gallop of Sir Galahad up the avenue.

"It is my husband!" my lady exclaimed. "I must leave you. When will you—and *she*—return?"

"In two days we will be here. I'll give out she's a sister of mine at the inn—no one knows her there—and I'll send you word and arrange a meeting. Until then, my lady, I wish you good-bye!"

Mr. Parmalee drew down his hat and strode unceremoniously away. Weak, trembling, my lady leaned for a few moments against a tree, trying to recover herself; then she turned slowly, and walked back to the house to meet her husband.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SILVER BREAKS THE NEWS.

The ~~dwelling~~ ^{dwelling}—the jointure house of the Dowager Lady Kingsland—stood, like all such places, isolated and alone, at the farthest extremity of the park. It was a dreary old building enough, weather-beaten and brown, with primly laid-out grounds, and row upon row of stiff poplars waving in the wintry wind. A lonely, forlorn old place—a vivid contrast to the beauty and brightness of Kingsland Court; and from the first day of her entrance the Dowager Lady Kingsland hated her daughter-in-law with double hatred and rancour.

"For the pauper half-pay officer's bold-faced daughter, we must drag out our lives in this horrible place!" she burst out, bitterly. "While Harriet Hunsden reigns *en princesse* amid the splendour of our ancestral home, we must vegetate in this rambling, dingy old barn. I'll never forgive your brother, Mildred. I'll never forgive him as long as I live for marrying that creature."

"Dear mamma," the gentle voice of Milly pleaded, "you must not blame Everard. He loves her, and she is as beautiful as an angel. It would have been all the same if he had married Lady Louise, you know. We would still have had to quit Kingsland Court."

"Kingsland Court would have had an earl's daughter for its mistress in that case. I could have left it without repining then. But to think that this odious, fox-hunting, steeplechase riding, baggage-cart-following *filles du regiment* should rule there, while we— Oh, it sets me wild only to think of it!"

"Don't think of it, then, mamma," coaxed Mildred. "We will make this wilderness blossom as the rose" next summer. As for Harrie, you don't know her yet—you will like her better when you do."

"I shall never like her," Lady Kingsland replied, with rancorous bitterness. "I don't want to like her. She is a proud, imperious upstart, and I sincerely hope she may make Everard see his headstrong folly in throwing himself away before the honeymoon is ended."

It was quite useless for Mildred to try to combat her mother's fierce resentment. Day after day she wandered through the desolate, draughty rooms, bewailing her hard lot, regretting the lost glories of Kingsland, and nursing her resentment towards her odious daughter-in-law. And when the bridal pair returned, and Milly timidly suggested the propriety of calling, my lady flatly refused.

"I never will!" she said spitefully. "I'll never call on Captain Hunsden's daughter, let people say what they please. I never countenanced the match before he made it. I shall not countenance it now, when she has usurped my place. She should never have been received in society—a person whose mother was no better than she ought to be."

"But, mamma,"—

"Hold your tongue, Milly! You always were a little fool! I tell you I will *not* call on my son's wife, and no more shall you. Let her come here. It will humble her pride a little, and his too. They both need it."

My lady adhered to her resolution with iron force, and received her son, when the day after his return he rode over, with freezing formality. But with all that she was none the less deeply displeased when he called and came to dinner, and left his bride at home.

"My humble house is not worthy my lady's imperial presence, I daresay," she remarked, with flashing eyes. "After the magnificence of barrack life and the splendour of Hunsden Hall, I scarcely wonder she cannot stoop to your mother's jointure house. A lady in her position *must* draw the line somewhere."

"You are unjust, mother," her son said, striving to speak calmly. "You always were unjust to Harriet. If you will permit us, we will both do ourselves the pleasure of dining with you to-morrow?"

My lady bowed ironically.

"It shall be precisely as the Prince and Princess of Kingsland please. My poor board will be only too much honoured."

Sir Everard's face flushed angrily, but he forbore to retort.

"It is natural, I suppose," he thought, riding homeward, "The contrast between Kingsland

Court and The Grange is striking. She is jealous, and angry, and hurt. Poor mother! Harrie must come with me to-morrow, and try to please her."

But when to-morrow came Harrie had a headache, and the baronet was obliged to go alone.

There was an ominous light in his mother's eyes, a warning compression of the mouth, and a look of troubled inquiry in Mildred's face, that told him a revelation was coming.

His mother's powerful eyes transfixed him the instant he appeared.

"I thought your wife was coming?" was her first remark.

"Harriet had a shocking bad headache. She has been ill all day," he replied, hastily. "It was quite impossible for her to leave her room. She regrets"—

"That will do, Everard." His mother rose as she spoke, with a short laugh. "I understand it. Don't trouble yourself to explain. Let us go to the dining-room—dinner waits."

"But, my dear mother, it is really as I say. Harrie is ill."

She looked at him with a glance of infinite scorn and contempt.

"Ill! Yes, ill of a guilty conscience, perhaps. Such a mother—such a daughter! I always knew how this mad *mésalliance* would end. I don't know that I regret it. I am only sorry that my son's wife should be the first to disgrace the name of Kingsland."

Sir Everard started as if an adder had stung him, turning dark red.

"Disgrace! Take care, mother! That is an ugly word."

"It is. But, however ugly, it is always best to call these things by their right names."

"These things! What, under heaven, do you mean?"

"Do you really need to ask?" she said, with cold contempt. "Are you, indeed, so blind and besotted where this woman is concerned? Why, my son's wife is the talk of the town, and my son sits here and asks me what I mean!"

The red flush of anger faded from the young husband's face. He turned deathly pale.

"Mamma—mamma!" Mildred said, imploringly. "Pray don't! You are cruel! Don't say such dreadful things!"

Her brother turned to her, his face white, his lips trembling with suppressed rage and wounded feeling.

"Your mother is cruel, and unjust, and unnatural," he said, in a hard, hoarse voice. "Do you tell me what she means, Mildred."

"Don't ask me, Everard!" Mildred said, in distress. "We have heard cruel, wicked

stories—false, I know—about Harrie and—a stranger—an American gentleman—who is stopping at the Bluebell Inn."

He knew all now. It was as he feared. The horrible suspicion had crept abroad already. He paused for a moment, unable to speak.

"Yes, Everard," his mother said, pity for him, hatred of his wife, strangely mingled in look and tone, "your bride of a month is the talk of the place. The names of Lady Kingsland and this unknown man go whispered together from lip to lip."

"What do they say?"

He asked the question in a hard, unnatural voice, the dead pallor of his face unchanging.

"Nothing!" Mildred exclaimed, indignantly—"nothing but their own base suspicions! She nearly fainted at first sight of him. He showed her a picture, and she ran out of the room and fell into hysterics. Since then he has written to her, and mysterious personages—females in disguise—visit him at the Bluebell. That is what they whisper, Everard—nothing more."

"Nothing more!" echoed her mother. "Quite enough, I think. What would you have, Miss Kingsland? Everard, who is this man?"

He looked at her, a strange smile upon his face,

"You appear to know more than I do, mother. He is an American—a travelling photographic artist—and my wife never laid eyes upon him until she saw him the day after our arrival in the library. As to the fainting and the hysterics, I chanced to be in the library all through that first interview, and I saw neither the one nor the other. I am sorry to spoil the pretty little romance in which you take such evident delight, my good, kind, charitable mother, but truth obliges me to tell you it is a fabrication from beginning to end. And now, if you will be good enough to tell me the name of the originator of this report, you will confer upon me the last favour I shall ever ask of you. My wife's honour is mine, and neither she nor I will ever set foot in a house where such stories are credited—not only credited but exulted in. Tell me the name of your tale-maker, Lady Kingsland, and permit me to wish you good evening."

"Everard!" his sister cried, in agony.

But he cut her short with an impatient wave of his hand.

"Hush, Mildred; let my mother speak."

"I have nothing to say." She stood haughtily before him, and they looked each other full in the face, mother and son. "My tale-maker is the whole town. You cannot punish them all, Sir Everard. There is truth

in this story, or it would never have originated; and he *has* written to her—that is beyond a doubt. He has told it himself, and shown her reply.”

“It is false!” he cried, fiercely. “My wife is as pure as the angels; and any one who dares to doubt that purity, even though it be the mother who bore me, is my enemy to the death!”

He dashed out of the room, out of the house, mounted Sir Galahad, and rode away as if Satan and his hosts were after him.

“Mamma, mamma!” Mildred cried, in unutterable reproach—what have you done?”

“Told him the truth, child.” Her face was deadly pale, her hands and lips trembling convulsively. “It is better she should know it, although that knowledge parts us for ever.”

Like a man gone mad, the young baronet galloped home. The sickly glimmer of the fitful moon shone on a face that would never be more ghastly in its coffin—on strained eyes and compressed lips. It seemed to him but an instant from the time he quitted The Grange until he dashed up the avenue at Kingsland, leaped off his foaming bay, and strode into the house. Straight to his wife’s room he went, fierce, invincible determination in every line of his rigid face.

“She *shall* tell me all—she shall, by Heaven!” he cried between his clenched teeth.

He entered her dressing-room—she was not there; her boudoir—she was not there; her bedroom—it, too, was empty. He seized the bell, and nearly tore it down. Claudine, the maid, looked in with a startled face.

“Where is your mistress?”

The girl gazed round with a bewildered air.

“Is my lady not here, sir? She sent me away over an hour ago. She was lying down in her dressing-room. She said she was ill.”

He looked at her a moment. It was evident she was telling the simple truth.

“Send Miss Silver here.”

“I am not sure that Miss Silver is in the house, Sir Everard. I saw her go out with Edwards some time ago; but I will go and see.”

Claudine departed. Five minutes passed—ten; he stood rigid as a stone. Then came steps—hurried, agitated—the footsteps of a man and a woman.

He strode out and confronted them—Edwards, his valet, and Sybilla Silver. Both were dressed as from a recent walk; both were pale and agitated faces.

Edwards barely repressed a cry at sight of his master, with that fixed, awful face.

“What is it?” Sir Everard asked.

A dull presentiment of some horrible calamity had taken possession of him, body and soul.

The valet looked at Sybilla in blank terror. Miss Silver covered her face with both hands, and turned away.

“What is it?” the baronet repeated, in a dull, thick voice. “Where is my wife?”

“Sir Everard, I—I don’t know how—she—she is not in the house.”

“Where is she?”

“She is—in the grounds.”

“Where?”

“In the Beech Walk.”

“With whom?”

He knew before he put the question. He had left her ill—unable to quit her chamber, as she said—and this was how he found her, coming home sooner than was anticipated.

“With whom?”

“With Mr. Parmalee.”

There was a dead pause. Sybilla clasped her hands, and looked imploringly up in his face.

“Don’t be angry with us, Sir Everard; we could not help seeing them. I lost a locket, and Edwards came to help me to look for it. It was by the merest chance we came upon them in the Beech Walk.”

“I am not angry”—still in that dull, thick voice. “Did they see you?”

“No, Sir Everard.”

“Did you hear what they said?”

“No, Sir Everard; we would not have listened. They were talking; my lady seemed dreadfully agitated, appealing to him, as it appeared, while he was cool and indifferent. Just before we came away we saw her give him all the money in her purse. Ah, here she is now. For pity’s sake, do not betray us, Sir Everard!”

She flitted away like a swift, noiseless ghost, closely followed by the valet; and an instant later Lady Kingsland, wild and pale, and shrouded in a long mantle, turned to enter her dressing-room, and found herself face to face with her husband.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BREAKING OF THE STORM.

Lady Kingsland looked at her husband, and recoiled with a cry of dismay. He stood before her so ghastly, so awful, that with a blind, unthinking motion of intense terror, she put out both hands, as if to keep him off.

“You have reason to fear me,” he said, in a hoarse, unnatural voice. “Wives have been murdered for less than this!”

Sybilla and Edwards heard the ominous

words, and looked blankly in each other's faces. They heard no more. The baronet caught his wife's wrist in a grasp of iron, drew her into the dressing-room, and closed the door. He stood with his back to it, gazing at her, his blue eyes filled with rage.

"Where have you been?"

He asked the question in a voice more terrible from its menacing calm than any wild outburst of fury.

His wife's eyes met his—full, and clear, and proud. She was deathly pale, but she came of a haughty and fearless race, and in this hour of her extremity she did not blench.

"In the Beech Walk," she answered, promptly.

"With whom?"

"With Mr. Parmalee."

Her glance never fell. She looked at him proudly, unquakingly, full in the face. The look in his flaming eyes, the tone of his ominous voice, were bitterly insulting, and with insult her imperious spirit rose.

"And you dare stand before me—you dare look me in the face," he said, between his clenched teeth, "and tell me this?"

"I dare!" she said, proudly. "You have yet to learn *what* I dare do, Sir Everard Kingsland."

She drew herself up, in her beauty and her pride, erect and defiant. Her long hair fell loose and unbound; her face was colourless as marble; but her dark eyes were flashing with anger and wounded pride, and at her brightest she had never looked more beautiful than she did now. In spite of himself, he softened a little at the sight.

"So beautiful and so lost!" he said, bitterly. "So utterly deceitful and depraved! Surely what they tell of her mother must be true. The taint of dishonour is in the blood."

The change was instantaneous. The pallor of her face turned to burning red. She clasped her hands with a sudden spasm over her heart.

"My mother!" she gasped. "What do you say of her?"

"What they say of you—that she was a false and wicked wife. Deny it if you can."

Again that change. The crimson flush died out, and left her white, and rigid, and cold, with eyes that literally blazed.

"No," she said, with an imperial gesture of scorn. "I deny nothing. If my husband can believe such a vile slander of his wife of a month, let it be. I scorn to deny what he credits so easily."

Sir Everard broke into a bitter laugh.

"I am afraid it would tax even your invention, my lady, to deny these very plain facts.

I leave you in your room, too ill to leave it—too ill by far to ride with me to my mother's, but *not* too ill to get up and meet *your lover*—shall I say it, madam?—clandestinely in the Beech Walk as soon as I am gone. You should be a little more careful, madam, and make sure, before you hold those confidential *tête-à-têtes*, that the servants are not listening or looking on. Lady Kingsland and Mr. Parmalee are the talk of the county already. To-night's meeting will be a last *bonne-bouche* added to the spicy dish of scandal."

"Have you done?" she asked, looking very pale. "Have you any more insults to offer?"

"Insults!" the baronet repeated, hoarse with passion. "You do well, madam, to talk of insults—lost, fallen creature that you are! You have dishonoured an honourable name, betrayed a husband who loved and trusted you with all his heart, blighted and ruined his life, covered him with disgrace. And you stand there and talk of insult! I have loved you as man never loved woman before; but Heaven help you, Harriet Kingsland, if I had a pistol now."

She fell down on her knees before him, and held up her clasped hands.

"Kill me!" she cried. "I am here at your feet. Have mercy and stab me to the heart, but do not drive me mad with your horrible reproaches! May Heaven forgive me if I have brought dishonour upon you, for I never meant it! Never—never—so help me Heaven!"

"Rise, madam!"—his voice shook with his inward agony. "Kneel to Him who will judge you for your baseness. It is too late to kneel to me. Oh, heavens!"—he turned away and covered his face with his hands—"to think how I have loved this woman, and how bitterly she has deceived me!"

The unutterable agony of his tone—that wild, fierce cry of anguish—to her dying day Harriet Kingsland might never forget it. His words burst from him, every one bitter, as if tinged with his heart's blood.

"I loved her, and I trusted her! I would have died to save her one hour of pain, and *this* is my reward! Dishonoured—disgraced—my life blighted—my heart broken—deceived from first to last!"

"No, no, no!" she shrieked aloud, and clung to his knees. "I swear it to you, Everard—I am guiltless! By all my hopes of Heaven, I am your true, your faithful, your loving wife!"

He turned and looked up at her in white amaze. Truth that no living being could doubt was stamped in agony on that upturned, beautiful face. He looked at her in mute anguish words can never paint, for he loved her—he loved her with a supreme love.

"Hear me, Everard!" she cried—"my own beloved husband! I met this man to-night because he holds a secret I am sworn to keep, and that places me in his power; but by all that is high and holy, I have told you the simple truth about him. I never saw him in all my life until I saw him that day in the library. I have never set eyes on him since, except for an hour to-night. Oh, believe me, Everard, or I shall die here at your feet!"

"And you never wrote to him?" he asked.

"Never—never!"

"Nor he to you?"

"Once—the scrawl you saw Sybilla Silver bring to me. I never wrote—I never sent him even a message."

"No?" His powerful eyes transfixed her. "How, then, came you two to meet to-night?"

"He wished to see me—to extort money from me for the keeping of this secret—and he sent word by Sybilla Silver. My answer was, 'I will be in the Beech Walk at eight to-night. If he wishes to see me, let him come to me there.'"

"Then you own to having deliberately deceived me? The pretended headache was—a lie?"

"No, it was true." She put her hand distractedly to her throbbing forehead. "It aches still, until I am almost blind with the pain. Oh, Everard, be merciful! Have a little pity for me, for I love you, and I am the most wretched creature alive!"

He drew back from her outstretched arms with a gesture of fierce repulsion.

"You show your love in a singular way, my Lady Kingsland. It is not by keeping guilty secrets from your husband, by meeting other men by night and by stealth in the grounds, that you are to convince me of your love. Tell me what this mystery means. I command you by your wifely obedience—tell me this secret at once."

"I cannot!"

"You mean you *will* not."

"I cannot!"

His blue eyes gleamed, but he restrained himself.

"Is it a secret of guilt and of shame? Tell me the truth."

"It is, but the guilt is not mine. The shame—the bitter shame and the burning expiation—Heaven help me—are!"

"And you refuse to tell me?"

"Everard, I have sworn!" she cried out, wildly. "Would you have me break a death-bed oath?"

"I would have you break ten thousand such oaths," he exclaimed, passionately, "when they

stand between you and your husband. Harriet Hunsden, your dead father was a villain!"

She sprang to her feet—she had been kneeling all this time—and confronted him like a Saxon Pythoness. Her great grey eyes actually flashed fire.

"Go!" she cried. "Leave me this instant! Were you ten times my husband, you should never insult the memory of the best, the noblest, the most devoted of fathers! I will never forgive you the words you have spoken until my dying day!"

"You forgive!" he retorted, with sneering scorn, stung out of all generosity. "Forgiveness is no word for such lips as yours, Lady Kingsland! Keep your guilty secrets, or your father's, or your mother's, whatsoever it may be, but *not* as my wife! No, madam! When the world begins to point the finger of scorn, through her own evil-doing, at the woman I have married, then from that hour she is no longer my wife. The woman who meets by night, and by stealth, the sharer of her hidden secrets, is no longer worthy to bear an honourable name. The law of divorce shall free you and your secrets together, but *until* that freedom comes—I command you—do you hear, madam?—I *command* you to meet this man no more! On your peril you write to him, or speak to him, or meet him again. If you do, *I will murder you both!*"

He dashed out of the room like a man gone mad, leaving her standing petrified in the middle of the floor.

One instant she stood, the room heaving, the walls rocking around her. Then, with a low, moaning cry, she tottered blindly forward and fell like a stone to the ground.

The storm burst at midnight. A gale surged through the trees with a noise like thunder. The rain fell in torrents. And while rain and wind beat tempestuously over the earth and roaring sea, the husband paced up and down the library with clenched teeth and locked hands and death-white face—for the time utterly mad; and the wife lay alone in the luxuriant room, deaf and blind to the tempest, in a dead swoon.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THE PERSON IN LONDON."

The February day was closing in London in a thick, clammy, yellow fog. No keen frost, no sparkling stars brightened the chill spring twilight. The sky, where it could be seen, was of a uniform leaden tint, the damp mist wet you to the bone, and a long, lamentable blast whistled round the corners, and pierced chillily through the thickest wraps. A bleak

and ghostly gloaming; and passengers strode through the greasy, black mud with surly faces and buttoned-up great-coats, and the inevitable London umbrella.

At the window of a dull and dirty little lodging a woman sat, in this dark gloaming, gazing out at the passers-by. It was a stuffy, nasty little back street, and there were very few passers-by this black, bad February evening. The house had a perpetual odour of onions and cabbage, as it is in the nature of such houses to have, and the room, "first-floor front," was in the last stage of lodging-house shabbiness and discomfort.

The woman was quite alone—a still, dark figure sitting motionless by the grimy window. She might have been carved in stone, so still she sat, so still she had sat for more than two hours. Her worn hands lay idly in her lap, her dark eyes looked straight before with a fixed, dull despair, dreadful to see.

Her dress was black, of the poorest sort, frayed and worn, and she shivered under a threadbare shawl drawn close round her shoulders. And, in spite of poverty and sickness, and despair and middle age, the woman was beautiful still, with a dark and haggard and wild sort of beauty, that would have haunted you to your dying day.

In her youth, and her first freshness and innocence, she must have been lovely as a dream; but that loveliness was all gone now—fierce sin and burning shame and bitter degradation were all stamped indelibly on that dark, despairing face.

The listless hands lay still, the great, glittering dark eyes stared blankly at the dingy houses opposite, at the straggling pedestrians, at the thickening gloom. The short February day was almost night now. The street lamps flared yellow and dull athwart the clammy fog.

"Another day," the woman murmured, slowly—"another endless day of sick despair gone. Alone and dying—the most miserable creature on the wide earth. Oh, great God, who didst forgive Magdalene, have a little pity on me!"

A spasm of fierce anguish crossed her face for an instant, fading away, and leaving the hopeless despair—more hopeless than before.

"I am mad, worse than mad, to hope as I do. She will never look upon my guilty face—she so pure, so stainless, so sweet—how dare I ask it? Oh, what happy women there are in the world! Wives who love and are beloved, and are faithful to the end! And I—think how I drag on life with all that makes life worth having gone for ever, while those happy ones, whose life is one blissful

dream, are torn by death from all who love them. To think that I once had a husband, a child, a home! To think what I am now—to think of it, and not to go mad!"

She laid her face against the cold glass with a miserable groan. "Have pity on me, oh, heaven," was her despairing wail, "and let me die!"

There was a rush of carriage wheels without, a hansom cab whirled up to the door, and a tall young man leaped out. Two minutes more, and the tall young man burst impetuously into the dark room.

"All alone, Mrs. Denover," called a cheery voice, "and all in the dark? Darkness isn't wholesome—too conducive to low spirits and the blue devils. Hallo, Jane Anne, idol of my young affections, bring up the gas."

He leaned over the greasy banister, shouting into the invisible regions below, and was answered promptly enough by a grimy maid-servant with a flickering dip candle.

"Tain't my fault, nor yet missis's," said this grimy maid, in an aggrieved tone. "Mrs. Denover will sit in the dark, which I've"—

"That will do, Jane Anne"—taking the dip, and unceremoniously cutting her short. "Vamoose—evaporate! When I want you I'll sing out."

He re-entered the room and placed the candle on the table. The woman had risen, and stood with both hands clasped over her heart, a wild, gleaming, eager light in her black eyes. But she strove to restrain herself.

"I am glad to see you back, Mr. Parmalee," she said, falteringly. "I have been expecting you for the last two days."

"And wearing yourself to skin and bone, as I knew you would, with your fidgets. What's the good of taking on so? I told you I'd come back as quick as I could, and I've done so. It ain't my fault that the time's been so long—it's Lady Kingsland's."

The wild look grew wilder. She came a step nearer.

"You have seen her?"

"That I have! And very well worth seeing she is, I tell you. She's as handsome as a picture, though not so handsome as *you* must have been at her age either, Mrs. Denover. And she says she'll see you."

"Oh, thank Heaven!"

The woman tottered back, and sank into a chair, utterly unable to stand.

"That's right," said Mr. Parmalee; "take a seat, and let us talk it all over at our ease."

He took one himself, not in the ordinary humdrum fashion, but with his face to the

back, his arms crossed over it, and his long legs twisted scientifically round the bottom.

"I've seen him and I've seen her," said the photographer, "and a finer-looking couple ain't from here to anywhere. And as the Lord made 'em He matched 'em, for an all-fired prouder pair you couldn't meet in a summer day's walk."

"She comes of a proud race," the woman murmured, feebly. "The Hunsdens are of the best and oldest stock in England."

"And she's thoroughbred, if there ever was a thoroughbred one yet, and blood *will* show in a woman as well as a horse. Yes, she's proud, and she's handsome and high-stepping and dreadful cut up, I can tell you, at the news I brought her."

The woman covered her face with her hands with a low moan. Mr. Parmalee composedly went on:

"She knew your picture the minute she clapped eyes on it. I was afraid she might holler, as you wimmin do, at the sight, and her husband and another young woman were present; but she's got grit, that girl—the real sort. She turns round, by George, and gives me *such* a look—went through me like a carving-knife—and gets up without a word and walks away. And she never sent for me, nor asked a question about it, although I mentioned you gave it to me yourself, until I forced her to it, and after that no one need talk to me about the curiosity of the fair sex."

"Does her husband know?"

"No, and he is as jealous as a Turk. I wrote her a note—just a line—and sent it by that other young woman I spoke of, and what does he do but come to me like a roaring lion, and like to pummel my innards out! I owe him one for that, and I'll pay him off, too. I had to send again to my lady before she would condescend to see me; but when she did I must say she behaved like a trump. She gave me thirty sovereigns plump down, promised me three hundred pounds, and told me to fetch you. It ain't as much as I expected to make in this speculation; but, on the whole, I consider it a pretty tolerable fair stroke of business."

"Thank Heaven!" the woman whispered, her face still hidden. "Thank Heaven—thank Heaven! I shall see my lost darling once more before I die!"

"Now, don't you go and take on, Mrs. Denver," observed Mr. Parmalee, "or you'll use yourself up, you know, and then you won't be able to travel to-morrow. And after to-morrow, and after you see your—well, my lady—there's the other little trip back to Uncle Sam's domains you've got to make. For, of course, you ain't a-going to stay in

England, and pester that poor young lady's life out."

"No," said Mrs. Denver, mournfully—"no; I will never trouble her again. Only let me see her once more, and I will go back to my native land, and wait until the merciful God sends me death."

"Oh, pooh!" said the artist. "Don't you talk like that; it kind of makes my flesh creep, and there ain't no sense in it. There's Aunt Deborah, down our way. You remind me of her. She was always going on so—wishing she was in Heaven, or something horrid, the whole time. It's want of victuals more than anything else. You haven't had any dinner, I'll be bound."

"No, I could not eat."

"Nor supper?"

"No; I never thought of it."

Mr. Parmalee got up, and was out of the room and hanging over the banister in a twinkling.

"Here—you Jane Anne!"

Jane Anne appeared.

"Fetch up supper, and look sharp—supper for two. Go round the corner and get us some oysters and a pint of port, and fetch up some baked potatoes and hot mutton chops—and quick about it!"

"Now, then," said Mr. Parmalee, reappearing, "I've been and despatched the slavery for provision, and you've got to eat, marm, when they come. I won't have people living on one meal a day, and wishing they were in Heaven, when I'm about. You've got to eat and drink, or you won't go a step with me to-morrow."

The threat was effective. The woman looked at him with wistful, yearning, dark eyes.

"I will do whatever you think best, Mr. Parmalee," she said, humbly. "You have been very good to me."

"I know it," said Mr. Parmalee, with a nod. "I *always* do the polite thing with your sex. My mother was a woman. She's down in Maine now, and can churn and milk eight cows, and do chores and make squash pie. Oh, them squash pies of my old lady's require to be eat to be believed in; and, for her sake, I always take to elderly female parties in distress. Here's the forage! Come in, Jane Anne, beloved of my soul, and dump 'em down and go."

Jane Anne did. Mr. Parmalee whipped off the covers, and a most savoury odour arose.

"Now, Mrs. Denver, you sit right up, and fall to. Here's oysters, and here's mutton chop, raging hot, and baked potatoes—delicious to look at. And here's a glass of port wine, and you've got to drink it without a whimper. Mind what I told you! You don't budge a

step to-morrow unless you eat a hearty supper to-night. I've said it, and what I say is like the laws of the Swedes and—what's-their-names?"

"You are very good to me," Mrs. Denover repeated, humbly and gratefully. "What would have become of me but for you?"

Mr. Parmalee retired betimes, slept soundly, and was up, brisk and breezy, somewhere in the grey and dismal day dawn. Breakfast, piping hot, smoked on the table when Mrs. Denover appeared—a wan, worn spectre, in the hollow morning light.

A cab came for them in half an hour, and whirled them off on the first stage of their journey.

In the golden light of the sunny spring afternoon, Mr. Parmalee made his appearance again at the Bluebell Inn, with a mysterious veiled lady, all in black, hanging on his arm.

"This here lady is my maiden aunt, come over from the State of Maine to see your British institutions," Mr. Parmalee said, in fluent fiction, to the obsequious landlady. "Her name is Miss Hepzekiah Parmalee. Let her have your best bed-room and all the luxuries this here hotel affords, and I"—with a superb wave of the hand—"will foot the bill."

"Miss Hepzekiah Parmalee" dined alone in her own room; then sat by the window, with white face and strained eyes, waiting for Mr. Parmalee, who had gone out.

It was almost dark when he came. He entered hurriedly, flushed and excited.

"Fortune favours us *this* bout, Mrs. Denover!" he said. "I've met an old chum down on the wharf yonder—a countryman—and I'd as soon have expected to find the President of the United States in this little one-horse town. His name's Davis—Captain Davis, of the schooner Angelina Dobbs—and he's going to sail for Southampton this very night, if the wind holds. *There's* a streak of luck, marm! A free passage for you and for me to Southampton to-night!"

"But my—Lady Kingsland?" she faltered.

"I've made that all right too. I met one of the flunkies, an under-gardener, and sent word to Sybilla—a young lady that lives in the house—that we were here, and that she'd better see us at once. I expect an answer every— Ah, by George, speak of the— Here she is!"

It was Miss Sybilla Silver, sailing gracefully down the street. Mr. Parmalee darted out and met her—superbly handsome, her dark cheeks flushed with some inward excitement, her black eyes gleaming with strange fire. The stoical artist was fairly dazzled.

"Is she here?" she breathlessly asked.

Mr. Parmalee nodded towards the window. It was not a very lover-like greeting—they did not even shake hands. But then curious eyes were watching them.

Sybilla gazed up a moment at the pale, haggard face with her gleaming eyes.

"They are alike," she said, under her breath—"mother and daughter. And *that* face is scarcely more haggard than the other one now."

"Have you told my lady?" inquired Parmalee.

"Yes. She has not left her room for three days. She is the shadow of her former self, and she was dreadfully agitated upon hearing it; but she answered, firmly, 'I will see her, and at once. I will meet her to-night.' I asked *where*, and then, for the first time, she was at a loss."

"The Beech Walk?" suggested the artist.

"The Beech Walk is watched. Sir Everard's spies are on the look-out. No; I know a better place. The young plantation slopes down to the very water's edge; the shrubbery is thick and dense, the spot gloomy. No one ever goes there. *You* can come by water, and fetch *her* in the boat. Land on the shore, under the stone terrace, about midnight. All will have retired, and my lady will meet you there."

"And you, Sybilla? The old lady and me, we sail at the turn of tide for Southampton—from there to take passage for America. I suppose you hain't forgotten your promise to marry me?"

She laughed softly—a sweet derisive laugh.

"Is it likely, George? I will follow you to America, and we will be married there. It is impossible for me to go with you now."

"Then we say good-bye here?"

"Yes. Good-bye, George, until we meet in New York."

She laughed up in his face—a laugh of pure derision, but he did not know it.

"Without fail. Adieu, and—for ever!"

She waved her hand, and fitted away, uttering the last word under her breath.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"HAVE YOU PRAYED TO-NIGHT, DESDEMONA?"

The sun went down—a fierce and wrathful sunset.

My lady sat by her chamber window, looking out at black sea and blacker sky.

She sat still and alone, gazing out at the dreary desolation of earth and heaven. The great house was still as a tomb; the bustle of

the servants' regions was far removed; the gnawing of a mouse behind the black panelling, the soft ticking of the toy clock, sounded unnaturally loud.

There was a tap at the door. Lady Kingsland had learned to know that soft, light tap—she had heard it often of late. A shiver ran over her, her pale lips compressed, her face set cold and rigid as marble.

"Come in," she said, and Sybilla Silver entered.

"I have seen Mr. Parmalee, my lady."

Her tones were the same as usual—soft, and melodious, and respectful. But the gentle voice did not reassure Lady Kingsland.

"Well?" she said, coldly.

"He will be there, my lady. *At half-past eleven to-night you will find your mother*"—slowly and distinctly—"waiting for you on the terrace, down by the shore."

The dark-red glow—a burning fire of shame—lit my lady's face.

"Have you seen her?" she asked.

"At the window of the Bluebell Inn—yes, my lady. It is very rash for her to expose herself, too, for hers is a face to strike attention at once, if only for the wreck of its beauty, and for its unutterable look of despair."

"Well, you had better see Claudine, and say I shall not require her services to-night. Inform me when the servants have all retired, and"—a momentary hesitation, but still speaking proudly—"does Sir Everard dine at home this evening?"

"Sir Everard just rode off as I came in, my lady. He dines with Major Morrell and the officers, and will not return until past midnight, very likely. He is always late at those military dinners."

"That will do—you may go."

"Shall I not light the lamp, my lady?"

"No; be good enough to leave me."

Sybilla quitted the room, her white teeth set together in a viperish clench.

Left alone, Harriet sat in the deepening darkness for over three hours, never moving—still and motionless, as if she were turned to stone.

A pretty Swiss clock played a waltz preparatory to striking eleven. She sat and listened until the last musical chime died away; then she arose, groped her way to the low, marble chimney-piece, struck a lucifer, and lit a large lamp.

The brilliant light flooded the room. Sybilla's rap came that same instant softly upon the door.

"I hear," my lady said, not opening it.

"What is it?"

"All have retired. The house is as still as

the grave. The south door is unfastened. The coast is clear."

"It is well. Good-night."

"Good-night."

She stood a moment listening to the soft rustle of Miss Silver's skirts in the passage; then, slowly and mechanically, she began to prepare for her night's work.

She took a long, shrouding mantle, wrapped it around her, drew the hood over her head, and exchanged her slippers for stout walking-shoes. Then she unlocked her writing-case, and drew forth a roll of bank-notes, thrust them into her bosom, and stood ready.

"My mother," she said—"let me think I go to meet my mother. Sinful, degraded, an outcast, but still my mother. Let me think of that, and be brave!"

She opened her door. The stillness of death reigned. She glided down the corridor, down the sweeping stairway, the soft carpeting muffling every tread—the dim night-lights, burning the night through in those spacious passages, lighting her on her way.

No human sound startled her. All in the house were peacefully asleep—all save that flying figure, and one other wicked watcher. She gained the door in safety. It yielded to her touch. She opened it, and was out alone in the black, gusty night.

The path leading to the stone terrace through the plantation was as familiar to Lady Kingsland as path could be—a gloomy path even at mid-day, lost in shadows, deserted and lonely as the heart of some primeval forest. But at this ghostly hour, under yonder black sky, with the wind roaring in unearthly shrieks through the rocking trees, it required no ordinary courage to face its dismal horrors.

It was a long, tortuous path, but it came to an end. The roar of the sea sounded awfully loud as it rose in sullen majesty; the flags of the stone terrace rang under her feet. Panting, breathless, cold as death, she leaned against the iron railing, her hands pressed hard over her tumultuous heart.

What was that? A footstep crashing through the underwood near at hand. She turned with a wordless cry of terror. A dark figure emerged from the trees and strode straight towards her. Then an awful voice spoke:

"I swore by the heavens above I would murder you if you ever came again to meet that man. False wife—accursed traitress—meet your doom!"

She uttered a long, low cry. She recognized the voice. It was the voice of her husband! She recognized the form—her husband's—with a long gleaming dagger in his hand,

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ON THE STONE TERRACE.

When Sybilla Silver parted from Lady Kingsland outside the chamber door, she went straight to her own room, and began her preparations for that night's work.

Her first act was to sit down and write a note. It was very brief, badly spelled, vilely written, on a sheet of coarsest paper, and sealed with a big blotch of red wax and the impress of a grimy thumb. This is what Miss Silver wrote:

Honoured Sir,—This is to Say that my Lady is Promised the hamerican Gent, for to meet him this Night at Midnight on the Stone Terrace, Which honoured Sir you ought too Know, which is why I write.—Yours too Command,
Sir Heverard Kingsland.

A FRIEND.

She sealed the note, directed it in the same atrocious writing to the baronet, and then, rising, proceeded deliberately to undress.

But not to go to bed. A large bundle lay on a chair. She opened it, drew forth a full suit of man's attire—an evening suit that the young baronet had worn but a few times, and the very counterpart of which he wore to-night.

Miss Silver stood before the glass and arrayed herself in these. She was so tall that they fitted her very well, and when her long hair was scientifically twisted up, and a hat of Sir Everard's crushed down upon it, she was as handsome a young fellow as you could see in a long day's search.

She left the mirror, crossed the room, unlocked a trunk with a key she took out of her bosom, and drew forth a morocco-case scabbard. The crest of the Kingslands and the monogram "E. K.," fancifully wrought, decorated the leather.

Opening this, she drew forth a long, glittering Spanish stiletto, not much thicker than a coarse needle, but strong and glittering, and deadly keen. On the shining blade the monogram "E. K." was again wrought.

"Sir Everard has not missed his pretty toy yet," she muttered. If he had only dreamed, when he saw it first, not a fortnight ago, of the deed it would do this night!

She closed the trunk, thrust the dagger into its scabbard, the scabbard into her bosom, blew out the lamp, and softly opened her door. She paused a second to listen. All was still as the grave.

She locked her door, put the key in her pocket, and stole towards Sir Everard's rooms.

His bed stood ready prepared; a lamp burned dimly on the dressing-table. Beside the lamp Miss Silver placed her anonymous letter; then she retreated as noiselessly as she

had entered, shut the door, and glided stealthily down the corridor, down the stairs, along the passages, and out of the same door which my lady had passed not ten minutes previously.

Swift as a snake, and more deadly of purpose, glided Sybilla along the gloomy avenues of the wood towards the seaside terrace. She reached the extremity of the woodland path almost as soon as her victim. A moment she paused, glaring upon her with eyes of fiercest hate, as she stood there alone and defenceless. The next, she drew out the flashing stiletto, flung away the scabbard, and advanced with it in her hand and horrible words on her lips.

"I swore by the heavens above I would murder you if you ever came again to meet that man! False wife—accursed traitress—meet your doom!"

There was a wild shriek. In that fitful light Lady Kingsland never doubted for a moment but that it was her husband; and the voice—Sybilla's stage practice and talent for mimicry stood her in good stead here—the voice was surely his.

"Have mercy!" she cried. "I am innocent, Everard! Oh, for heaven's sake, do not murder me!"

"Wretch—traitress—die! You are not fit to pollute the earth longer! Go to your grave with my hate and my curse!"

With a sudden paroxysm of mad fury the dagger was lifted. One fierce hand gripped Harriet's throat. A choking shriek—the dagger fell—a gurgling cry drowned in the throat—a fierce spurt of hot blood—a reel backward and a heavy fall over the low iron railing—down, down on the black shore beneath—and the pallid moonlight, gleaming above, shone on one figure standing on the stone terrace *alone*, with dagger dripping blood in its hand.

* * * * *

The mess dinner was a very tedious affair—to one guest, at least. Major Morrell and the officers told good stories and sang doubtful songs, and passed the wine, and grew hilarious; and Sir Everard chafed horribly under it all, and longed for the hour of his release.

It was almost midnight when the young baronet reached home.

He went up to his dressing-room, his heart full to bursting. The sight of a folded note, lying on the table, alone arrested his excited steps. He took it up, looked at the strange superscription, tore it open, ran over its diabolical contents, and reeled as if struck a blow.

He flung it, in a paroxysm of mad fury, into the fire. A flash of flame, and Sybilla Silver's artfully-written note was for ever gone. He started up in white fury,

Sir Everard seized the bell-rope and rang a peal that resounded with unearthly echoes through the sleeping house. Five minutes of mad impatience—ten; then Claudine, scared and shivering, appeared, *en sac de nuit*, and in her bare feet.

"Where is your mistress?"

The unexpected sight of her master—his white, wild face, and hoarse question—made Claudine recoil with a shriek.

"*Mon Dieu!* how should I know?"

"Where is Miss Silver?"

"In bed, I think, monsieur."

"Go to her. Tell her I want to see her at once. Lose no time."

Claudine disappeared. Miss Silver was so very soundly asleep that it required five minutes' knocking to rouse her. Once aroused, however, she threw on a dressing gown, thrust her feet into slippers, and appeared before the baronet with a pale, anxious inquiring face.

"Where is my wife? Where is Lady Kingsland?"

"Spare me!" she cried, faintly. "I dare not tell you!"

"Speak," he thundered, "or, by the heavens above us, I'll tear it from your throat! Is she with *him*?"

"She is"—cowering, shrinking, trembling. There was an awful pause.

"Where?"

"On the stone terrace."

"How do you know?"

"He returned this afternoon. He sent for me. He told me to tell her to meet him there to-night, about midnight. She did not think you would return before two or three—'Oh, for pity's sake'—"

He thrust her from him with a force that sent her reeling against the wall.

"I'll have their hearts' blood!" he thundered, with an awful oath.

The madman, goaded to insane fury, rushed out of the hall—out of the house.

Half an hour passed, and Sir Edward returned. "It is false!" he shouted—"a false, devilish slander! She is not there!"

A shriek from Claudine—a wild, wild shriek. With bloodless cheek and starting eyes, she was pointing to the baronet's hands.

All looked, and echoed that horror-struck cry. They were literally *dripping blood!*

CHAPTER XXIX.

BRANDED.

A blank, dreadful pause followed. They looked at him, at one another, in white, frozen horror, and then recoiled. The baronet lifted

his hands to the light, and gazed at their crimson hue with wild, dilated eyes and ghastly face.

"Blood!" he said, in an awful whisper—"blood! Great Heaven, it is *hers!* She is murdered!"

The listeners recoiled still further, almost paralyzed at the sight, at the words, at the awful thought that a murderer, red-handed, stood before them.

The young husband heeded them not. In the flash of an eye he was galvanized into new life.

"A horrible deed has been done this night!" he cried, in a voice that rang down the long hall like a bugle blast. "A murder has been committed! Rouse the house, fetch lights, and follow me!"

Edwards, who was there, rose up, trembling in every limb.

"Quick!" his master thundered. "Is this a time to stand agape? Sybilla, sound the alarm. Let all rise and join in the search."

He led the way; there was a general rush from the house. The men bore lanterns; the women clung to the men, terror and curiosity struggling, but curiosity getting the best of it. In dead silence all made their way to the stone terrace—all but one.

Sybilla Silver saw them depart, stood a moment irresolute, then turned and sped away to Sir Everard's dressing-room. She drew the compact bundle of clothes from their corner, removed the dagger, tied up the bundle again with a weight inside, and hurriedly left the house.

There was an old sunken well, half-filled with slimy, green water, mud, and filth, in a remote end of the plantation. Thither Sybilla made her way in the ghostly moonlight unobserved, and flung her bloodstained bundle into its vile, poisonous depths.

She hurried away, and struck into a path leading to the stone terrace.

Sybilla Silver threw the dagger, with a quick, fierce gesture, into the wood, and sprang in among the rest with glistening, greedy black eyes. They stood in a semi-circle, in horror-struck silence, on the terrace. The light of half a dozen lanterns streamed redly on the stone flooring, but redder than that lurid light, a great pool of blood lay gory before them. The iron railing, painted creamy white, was all clotted with jets of blood, and, clinging to a projecting knob, something fluttered in the bleak blast; but they did not see it. All eyes were riveted on the awful sight before them—every tongue was paralyzed. Over all the struggling moon tore through ragged black clouds, and the spray of the angry waves

leaped up in their very faces. Edwards, the valet, was the first to break the dreadful silence.

"My master," he cried, shrilly—"he will fall!"

He dropped his lantern and sprang forward just in time and no more. The young baronet reeled and fell heavily backward. The sight of that blood—the life blood of his bride—seemed to freeze the very heart in his body. With a low moan, he lay in his servant's arms like a dead man.

"Take your master to his room, Edwards. It is no use lingering here now; we must wait until morning. Some awful deed has been done, but it may not be my lady murdered," said Sybilla Silver.

They bore the insensible man to the mansion, to his room, where Edwards applied himself to his recovery. Sybilla aided him silently, skilfully. Meantime the two footmen were galloping like mad to the village, to rouse the authorities with their awful news.

Morning came at last. To the household at Kingsland, that night of horror seemed a century long; and in his room Sir Everard lay in a deep stupor—it was not sleep. Sybilla, upon first faint signs of consciousness, had administered a powerful opiate.

All that day, all the next, and the next, and the next, the fruitless search for the murdered bride was made. All in vain.

Sir Everard rousing himself from his stupor of despair, threw himself body and soul into the search, with a fierce energy that perhaps saved him from going mad with horror, and misery, and remorse.

Mr. Parmalee, who had disappeared, was searched for high and low. Immense rewards were offered for the slightest trace of him—immense rewards were offered for the body of the murdered woman. In vain—in vain!

Towards the close of the second week a body was washed ashore some miles down the coast, and the authorities there signified to the authorities of Worrel that the corpse might be the missing lady.

Sir Everard, his mother, and Miss Silver went at once. But the sight was too horrible to be twice looked at. Every garment had been washed away, and the face and head were so mutilated that identification by means of the features was impossible.

But the height corresponded, and so did the long waves of flowing hair; and Sybilla Silver, the only one with nerve enough to glance again, pronounced it emphatically to be the body of Lady Kingsland.

There was to be a verdict, and the trio remained; and before it commenced, a celebrated

detective, employed from the first by Sir Everard, appeared upon the scene with crushing news. He held up a blood-stained dagger before the eyes of the baronet.

"Do you know this little weapon, Sir Everard?"

Sir Everard recognized it at once.

"It is mine," he replied. "I purchased it last year in Paris. My initials are upon it."

"So I see," was the dry response.

"How comes it here? Where did you find it?"

"I found it in a very queer place, Sir Everard—lodged in the branches of an elm tree, not far from the stone terrace. I think this little weapon did the deed. I'll go and have a look at the body."

He went. Yes, there, in the region of the heart, was a gaping wound. But the sea had opened it, and the flesh was so gnawed away that it seemed impossible to tell whether the death-blow had been given by that slender knife.

The inquest came on; the facts came out—mysteriously whispered before, spoken aloud now. And for the first time the truth dawned on the stunned baronet—he was suspected of the murder of his wife.

The revolting atrocity, the unnatural horror of the charge, nerved him as nothing else could have done. His pale, proud face grew rigid as stone; his blue eyes flashed scornful defiance; his head reared itself haughtily aloft. How dare they accuse him of so monstrous a crime?

But the circumstantial evidence was crushing. Sybilla Silver's alone would have damned him.

She gave it with evident reluctance—but give it she did with frightful force, and the bereaved young husband stood stunned at the terrible strength of the case she made out.

Everything told against him; his very eagerness to find the murderer seemed but throwing dust in their eyes. Not a doubt lingered in the minds of the coroner or his jury; and before sunset that day Sir Everard Kingsland was on his way to Worrel gaol, to stand his trial for the murder of his wife.

CHAPTER XXX.

MISS SILVER ON OATH.

The day of trial came. Long, miserable weeks of waiting, weeks of anguish, and remorse, and despair had gone before, and Sir Everard Kingsland emerged from his cell to take his place in the criminal dock.

He pleaded "Not guilty!" with an eye that flashed, and a voice which rang, and a look in his pale, proud face that no murderer's face

ever wore on this earth. But his words were poor and weak against the thrilling eloquence of one of the first criminal lawyers in the realm.

"Call Sybilla Silver!"

All in black—in trailing crape and sables, tall, stately—Sybilla Silver obeyed the summons.

"Your name is Sybilla Silver, and you reside at Kingsland Court. May we ask in what character—as friend or domestic?"

"As both. Sir Everard Kingsland has been my friend and benefactor from the first. I have been treated as a confidential friend both by him and his mother."

"By the deceased Lady Kingsland also, I conclude?"

"I was in the late Lady Kingsland's confidence—yes."

"You were the last who saw her alive on the night of the tenth of March—the night of the murder?"

"I was."

"What hour was that?"

"About ten minutes before eleven."

"What communication were you making to Lady Kingsland at that hour?"

"I came to tell her the household had all retired—that she could quit the house unobserved whenever she chose."

"You knew then that she had an assignation for that night?"

"I did. It was I who brought her the message. She was to meet Mr. Parmalee at midnight on the stone terrace."

"Who was this Mr. Parmalee?"

"An American gentleman—a photographic artist, between whom and my lady a secret existed."

"And this secret was the cause of their midnight mysterious meeting?"

"It was."

"Where was Sir Everard on this night?"

"At a military dinner, given by Major Morrell here in Worrel."

"What time did Sir Everard return to Kingsland Court?"

"At half-past eleven, as nearly as I can judge. I did not see him for some ten or fifteen minutes after."

"What did the prisoner say to you?"

"He asked me where was his wife. He demanded an answer in such a way that I dared not disobey."

"You told him?"

"I did. And then, like a madman, he rushed out of the house, swearing, 'I'll have their hearts' blood!'"

"Did any one hear the prisoner use those words, on the night of the murder but yourself?"

"Yes; Edwards, his valet, and Claudine, the lady's maid."

"When did the prisoner reappear?"

"In a little over half an hour. He rushed in in the same wild way he had rushed out—like a madman."

"What did he say?"

"He shouted, 'It is false—a false, devilish slander! She is not there!'"

"Well—and then?"

"And then Claudine shrieked aloud, and pointed to his hands. They were dripping with blood!"

"Can you relate what followed?"

"There was the wildest confusion. Claudine fainted. Sir Everard shouted for lights and men. 'There has been a horrible murder done,' he said. 'Fetch lights and follow me!' And then we all rushed to the stone terrace."

"What was the prisoner's conduct on the terrace?"

"He fainted before he was there five minutes. They had to carry him senseless to the house."

"Now, Miss Silver," said the counsel for the prosecution, "from what you said at the inquest, and from what you have let drop to-day, I infer that my lady's secret was no secret to you. Am I right?"

There was a momentary hesitation—a rising flush, a drooping of the brilliant eyes. Then Miss Silver replied:

"Yes."

"How did you learn it?"

"Mr. Parmalee himself told me."

"And you know nothing now of his whereabouts? That is strange."

"It is strange, but no less true than strange. I have never seen or heard of Mr. Parmalee since the afternoon preceding that fatal night."

"How did you see him then?"

"He had been up to London for a couple of days on business connected with my lady. He had returned that afternoon with another person; he sent for me to inform my lady. I met and spoke to him in the street, just beyond the Bluebell Inn."

"What had he to say to you?"

"Very little. He told me to tell my lady to meet him precisely at midnight on the stone terrace. Before midnight the murder was done. What became of him, why he did not keep his appointment, I do not know. He left the inn very late, paid his bill, and has never been seen or heard of since."

"Had he any interest in Lady Kingsland's death?"

"On the contrary, all his interest lay in her remaining alive."

"Miss Silver, who was the female who accompanied Mr. Parmalee from London, and who quitted the Bluebell Inn with him on the night of the tenth?"

The hour of Sybilla's triumph had come. She lifted her black eyes, glittering with black flame, and shot a quick, sidelong glance at the prisoner. Awfully white, awfully calm, he sat like a man of stone, awaiting to hear what would cost him his life.

"Who was she?" the counsel repeated; and Sybilla turned towards him, and answered, in a voice plainly audible the length and breadth of the long room:

"She called herself Mrs. Denover. Mr. Parmalee called her his sister. Both were false. *She was Captain Harold Hunsden's divorced wife, Lady Kingsland's mother, and a lost, degraded outcast!*"

CHAPTER XXXI.

FOUND GUILTY.

There was the silence of death. Men looked blankly in each other's faces, then at the prisoner. With an awfully corpse-like face, and wild, dilated eyes, he sat staring at the witness—struck dumb.

The silence was broken by the counsel for the prosecution. Even he, for an instant, had sat petrified.

"This is a very extraordinary statement, Miss Silver," he said. "Are you quite certain of its truth? It is an understood thing that the late Captain Hunsden was a widower."

"He was nothing of the sort. It suited his purpose to be thought so. Captain Hunsden was a very proud man. It is scarcely likely he would announce his bitter shame to the world."

"And his daughter was cognizant of these facts?"

"Only from the night of her father's death. On that night he revealed to her the truth, under a solemn oath of secrecy. Previous to that she had believed her mother dead. That deathbed oath was the cause of all the trouble between Sir Everard and his wife. Lady Kingsland would have died rather than break it."

She glanced again—swift, keen, sidelong—a glance of diabolical triumph at the prisoner. But he did not see it—he might have been stone-blind; he only heard the words—the words that seemed burning to the core of his heart.

This, then, was the secret, and the wife he had loved, and doubted, and scorned, had been true to him as truth itself; and now he knew her worth, and purity, and high honour when it was too late!

The dead silence of the crowded court seemed to deepen. You might have heard a pin drop. Clear and sweet Sybilla Silver's voice rang from end to end, each word cutting mercilessly through the unhappy prisoner's very soul.

"Her maiden name had been Maria Denover, and she was a native of New York city. At the age of eighteen an English officer met her whilst on a visit to Niagara, fell desperately in love with her, and married her. Even at that early age she was utterly lost and abandoned; and she only married Captain Hunsden in a fit of mad desperation and rage because John Thorndyke, her lover, refused, scornfully to make her his wife.

"Again she met her lover. Three weeks after, the wronged husband and all the world knew the revolting story of his degradation. She had fled with Thorndyke. There was a divorce, of course. The matter was hushed up as much as possible, for the abandoned woman's friends were wealthy. Captain Hunsden went back to his regiment a disgraced and broken-hearted man. Two years after he sailed for England, but not to remain. How he wandered over the world, his daughter accompanying him, from that time until nearly two years ago he returned to Hunsden Hall, every one knows. But during all that time he never heard one word of or from his lost wife.

"She remained with Thorndyke—half-starved, brutally-beaten, horribly ill-used—tainted from the first by him, and hated at the last. But she clung to him through all, as women do cling. She had given up the whole world for his sake; she must bear his abuse to the end. And she did, heroically. He died—stabbed in a drunken brawl—died with her kneeling by his side, and his last word an oath. He died and was buried, and she was alone in the world—heart-broken, health-broken—as miserable a woman as the wide earth held. One wish alone lived and was strong within her—to look again upon her child before she died. She had no wish to speak to her—to reveal herself—only to look once more upon her face, then lie down by the roadside and die. She knew she was married, and living here; Thorndyke had maliciously kept her *au fait* of her husband and child. She sold all she possessed, and took a steerage passage for England.

"That was the story she told Mr. Parmalee. 'You will go to Devonshire,' she said to him; 'you will see my child. Tell her I died, humbly praying her forgiveness. She is rich; she will reward you.'

"Mr. Parmalee succeeded in obtaining an interview with Lady Kingsland. He knew her secret, and she had to meet him whenever he

chose. He threatened to tell Sir Everard else, and the thought of her husband ever discovering her mother's shame was agony to her. She knew how proud he was, how proud his mother was, and she would have died to save him pain. And that is why she met Mr. Parmalee by night and by stealth—why she gave him money—why all the horrors that have followed occurred."

Once more the cruel, clear, unflinching voice paused. A groan broke the silence—a groan of such unutterable anguish and despair from the tortured husband that every heart thrilled to hear it.

A murmur of horror ran through the court. No one doubted longer.

There was the summing-up of the evidence—one damning mass against the prisoner. There was the judge's charge to the jury. Sir Everard heard no word—saw nothing. He fell into a stunned stupor that was indeed like madness.

The jury retired—vaguely he saw them go. They returned—was it minutes or hours they had been gone? His dulled eyes looked at them expressionless.

"How say you, gentlemen of the jury—guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty!"

The judge arose and put on the black cap, his face white, his lips trembling.

Only the last words seemed to strike the prisoner—to crash into his whirling brain with a noise like thunder. The long, pitying address was lost; but he heard those last words:

"And that there you be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may the Lord have mercy upon your soul!"

With the shriek of a madman, Sir Everard Kingsland threw up both arms, and fell face forward. They raised him up. Agonized nature had given way—he was writhing in the horrors of an epileptic fit.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SYBILLA'S TRIUMPH.

It was the night before the execution. In his feebly-lighted cell the condemned man, Sir Everard Kingsland, sat alone, trying to read by the pale, glimmering light.

The key clanked—the door swung back. The pale prisoner lifted his serene eyes; a tall, dark figure stepped in.

"Sybilla!"

"Yes, Sir Everard."

The great door closed with a bang.

"I thought we parted yesterday for the last time in this world," said the baronet, calmly.

She laughed a low derisive laugh, and came up close to him. He shut his book, and looked

at her in wonder. Was this Sybilla Silver he had known for two years—the mild and submissive Sybilla?

"What do you mean? What have you come hither to-night? Why do you look like that? What is it all?"

"It is this!" She flung up her arms with a strange, wild gesture. "That the mask worn two long years is about to be torn off. It means, that you are to hear the truth; it means that the purpose of my life is fulfilled; it means that the hour of my triumph has come!"

He sat and looked at her—lost in wonder.

"The Sybilla Silver you knew was a mockery and a delusion. Behold the real one, for the first time in your life!"

"Woman, who are you? What are you?"

"I am the granddaughter of Zenith the gipsy, the woman your father wronged to the death, and your bitterest enemy, Sir Everard Kingsland."

He gazed at her, speechless—struck dumb.

"I come here to-night to tell you the truth, and you shall hear it. Did I not swear your life away? For what? That the astrologer's prediction might be fulfilled—that the heir of Kingsland Court might die a felon's death on the scaffold!"

"What was the astrologer's prediction—that terrible prediction that shortened my father's life?"

"It was this—that his only son and heir, born on that night, would die by the hand of the common hangman, a murderer's death, on the scaffold. Enough to blight any father's life who believed in it, was it not?"

"It was devilish. My poor father! Tell me the name of the fiend incarnate who could do so diabolical deed—for you know."

"I do. That man was my father."

"Your father?"

"Ay. Achmet the astrologer. Ha, ha! As much an astrologer as you or I. It was his part of our vengeance—my part was to see it carried out. I swore, by my dying mother's bedside, to devote my life to that purpose. Have I not kept my oath?"

She folded her arms, and looked at him with a face of such devilish malignity that words are poor and weak to describe it. He recoiled from her as from a visible demon.

"You have heard but half the truth. Oh, potent Prince of Kingsland, hear me out! You will be hanged to-morrow morning for murdering your wife! You didn't murder her, did you? Who do you suppose did it?"

He rose to his feet; he staggered back against the wall, his eyes starting from their sockets. He stood, holding by the wall,

paralyzed, frozen with horror. He knew all, as surely as if he had seen the horrid tragedy.

"Yes, I murdered her," Sybilla reiterated, with sneering triumph. "Disguised in your clothes, using your dagger; and she died, believing it to be you. And to-morrow, for my crime, you will die!"

And still he gazed, paralyzed, stunned, motionless, speechless. Before him the woman stood, drawn up to her full height, looking at him with blazing eyes.

"Poor fool!" she continued, with unutterable scorn—"poor, blind, besotted fool! And this is the end of all! Here we part, Sir Everard Kingsland. Call the gaoler—tell him what I have told you—tell it through the length and breadth of the land, if you choose. Not one will believe you. And to-morrow, when the glorious sun rises—the sun you will never see—I will be far away. In Spain, the land of my mother and my grandmother, I go to join our race—to become a dweller in tents—a gipsy, free as the wind that blows. But first I go straight from here to Kingsland Court, to tell your mother what I have just told you. Once more farewell, and *bon voyage* to you, my haughty young baronet, the last of an accursed race!"

The door swung open—Miss Silver flitted out. It broke the spell. The prisoner started forward—tried hoarsely, vainly to speak. Enfeebled by long illness, by repeated shocks, he staggered a pace or two, and fell, face forward, at the gaoler's feet like a log.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

And while Sir Everard Kingsland lay in his felon's cell, doomed to die, where was she for whose murder he was to give his life? Really murdered? Is there any one above the artless and unsuspecting age of six, who reads this story, that does not know better?

Harriet—Lady Kingsland—was not dead. Hundreds of miles of sea and land rolled between her and Kingsland Court; and in a stately New York mansion she looked out at the sparkling April sunshine, with life and health beating strong in her breast.

Mr. George Washington Parmalee had saved her life. On that tragical night of the tenth of March he had quitted the Bluebell with Mrs. Denver, and descended at once to the shore, where a boat from the Angelina Dobbs was awaiting him.

The Angelina herself lay at anchor a mile or two away, ready to sail as soon as her two passengers came aboard.

Mr. Parmalee took the oars, and rowed away in the direction of the Park. The sickly glimmer of the moon showed him the stone terrace and the solitary figure standing waiting there.

He had neared the spot, and rowed softly along under the deep shadow of overhanging trees, whose long arms trailed in the waves, when he espied a second figure, muffled in a cloak, emerge and confront the lady. He recognized, or thought he recognized, the baronet, and came to a deadlock, with a stifled imprecation.

"It's all up with them three hundred pounds *this* bout," he thought. "*Confound* the luck!"

He could not hear the words—the distance was too great—but he could see them plainly. The wild shriek of Lady Kingsland would have been echoed by her terrified mother, had not the artist clapped his hand firmly over her mouth.

"Be silent, can't you? Oh, Heaven!"

He started up in horror, nearly upsetting the boat. He had seen the fatal blow given, he saw the body hurled over the railing, and he *saw the face of the murderer!*

A flash of moonlight shone full upon it, bending down, and he recognized, in men's clothes, the woman who was to be his wife.

A deadly sickness came over him. He sat down in the boat, feeling as though he were going to faint. For Mrs. Denver, she was numb with utter horror.

The assassin fled. As she vanished, Parmalee looked up with a hollow groan, remained irresolute for an instant, shook himself, and took up the oars.

"We must pick up the body," he said, in an unearthly voice. "The waves will wash it away in five minutes."

He rowed ashore, lifted the lifeless form, carried it into the boat, and laid it across the mother's knee.

"Her heart beats," said Mrs. Denver, raining tears and kisses on the cold face. "Oh, my child—my child! It is your wretched mother who has done this!"

They reached the Angelina Dobbs, where they were impatiently waited for, and captain and crew stared aghast at sight of the supposed corpse.

"Do you take the Angelina Dobbs for a cemetery, Mr. Parmalee?" demanded Captain Dobbs, with asperity. "Who's that 'ere corpse?"

"Come into the cabin and I'll tell you," responded Mr. Parmalee, leading the way, and bearing his burden.

"She is not dead!" exclaimed Mrs. Denver.

"Her heart flutters. Oh, pray leave me alone with her. I think I know what to do."

The men quitted the cabin. Mrs. Denover removed her daughter's clothing and examined the wound. It was deep and dangerous-looking, but not necessarily fatal. She knew that, and she had had considerable experience during her rough life with John Thorndyke. She staunched the flow of blood, bathed and dressed the wound, and finally the dark eyes opened and looked vaguely in her face.

"Who are you? Where am I?"—very feebly.

The woman trembled from head to foot, and sank down on her knees by the bedside.

"I am your nurse," she said, tremulously; "and you are with friends who love you."

The deep, dark eyes still gazed at her—memory was slowly coming back.

"Ah, I remember!" A look of intensest anguish crossed her face. "You are my mother!"

"Your most wretched mother! Oh, my darling, I am not worthy to look into your face!"

"You are all that is left to me now. Ah, heaven pity me—since *he* thinks me guilty! I remember all. He tried to murder me—he called me a name I will never forget. Mother, how came I here? Is this a ship?"

Very gently, softly, soothingly, the mother told how Mr. Parmalee had saved her life.

"And where are we going now?"

"To Southampton, I think. But we will return if you wish it."

"To the man who tried to take my life? Ah, no, mother! Never again in this world to *him*. Call Mr. Parmalee."

The artist presented himself promptly, quite overjoyed.

"Why, now," said Mr. Parmalee, "I'd rather see this than have a thousand dollars plump down. Why, you look as spry almost as ever. How do you feel?"

She reached out her hand to him with a wan smile.

"You have been very good to me and my mother. Be good until the end. If I die, bury me where *he* will never hear of my death, nor look upon my grave. If I live, take me back to New York—I have friends there—and don't let him know whether I am living or dead."

Mr. Parmalee squeezed her slender hand.

"I'll do it! It's a go! I owe him one for that kicking; and, by Jove, here's a chance to pay him. Jest you keep up heart and get well, and we'll take you to New York in the Angelina Dobbs, and nobody be the wiser."

And Mr. Parmalee kept his word. They lay aboard the vessel whilst loading at Southamp-

ton, and a surgeon was in daily attendance upon the sick girl. He did his best, and was liberally paid out of the three hundred pounds which Mrs. Denover had found in the bosom of Harriet's dress. But for days and weeks she lay very ill—ill unto death—delirious, senseless. Then the fever yielded, and death-like weakness ensued.

This, too, passed; and by the time the Angelina reached New York, the poor girl was able, wan and feeble, to saunter up and down the deck, and drink in the life-giving sea-air.

Thus, whilst fruitless search was being made for Parmalee throughout London—whilst detectives examined every passenger who sailed in the emigrant ships—he was safely skimming the Atlantic in Captain Dobbs' cockle-shell.

To do him justice, he never thought—and no more did Harriet—of what might follow her disappearance. Sir Everard would leave the country, they both imagined, and her fate would remain for ever a mystery.

So the supposed dead bride reached New York in safety, and that dead body washed ashore and identified by Sybilla Silver, to suit her own ends, was some nameless unfortunate.

On the pier in New York Mr. Parmalee and Lady Kingsland parted.

"I am going to my uncle's house," she said. "My mother's brother, Hugh Denover, is a rich merchant, and will receive us, I know. Keep my story secret, and come and see me next time you visit New York. Here is my uncle's address. Give me yours, and if ever it is in my power, I will not forget how nobly you have acted, and how inadequately you have been repaid."

They shook hands and parted.

Mr. Parmalee went "down East," not at all satisfied with his little English speculation. He had lost a handsome reward and a handsomer wife. He dared hardly think to himself that Sybilla had done the horrid deed, and he had never breathed a word of his suspicion to Harriet.

"Let her think it's the baronet, if she's a mind to," he said to himself. "I ain't a-goin' to do him a good turn. But I know better."

Harriet and her mother sought out Mr. Denover. He lived in a stately mansion, with his wife and one son, and received both poor waifs with open arms. His lost sister had been his boyhood's pet; he had nothing for her now but pity and forgiveness when she looked at him with death in her face.

"My poor Maria," he said, with tears in his eyes. "Don't talk of the wretched past. I love my only sister, in spite of all, and neither she nor her child shall want a home whilst I have one."

Harriet told her story very briefly. Her father had been dead for two years—she had married—she had not lived happily with her husband, and they had parted. She had come to Uncle Hugh—she knew he would give his sister's daughter a home.

She told her story with dry eyes and unfaltering voice; but Mr. Denover, looking in that pale, rigid, young face, read more of her despair than she dreamed.

The penitent wife of Captain Hunsden did not long survive to enjoy her new home. A fortnight after their arrival she lay upon her deathbed. Nothing could save her. She had been doomed for months—life gave way, when the excitement that had buoyed her up was gone.

By night and day Harriet watched by her bedside, and the repentant Magdalen's last hours were the most blessed she had ever known.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR. PARMALEE TURNS UP TRUMPS.

Mr. G. W. Parmalee went down to Dobbsville, in the State of Maine, and reposed again in the bosom of his family. He went to work on the paternal acres for awhile, gave that up in disgust, set up once more a picture gallery, and took the portraits of the ladies and gentlemen of Dobbsville at so much per head.

But Mr. Parmalee found life very slow—he was weary nearly unto death—and neither man nor woman delighted him. He was fast becoming a misanthrope. His speculation had failed, his love was lost—nothing lay before him but a long and dreary existence spent in immortalizing in tin-types the belles and beaux of Dobbsville.

Time flew by, until one day Mr. Parmalee got hold of an English newspaper, which referred to the conviction for murder of Sir Everard Kingsland, and Parmalee sat for a good hour, half stupefied over the account. The paper contained a *resumé* of the trial, from first to last—dwelling particularly on Miss Silver's evidence, and ending with the sentence of the court.

The paper dropped from the artist's paralyzed hand. He covered his face, and sat in a trance of horror and remorse. His mother came to call him to dinner, and as he looked up in answer to her call, she started back with a scream at sight of his unearthly face.

"Lor' a-massy, George Washington, whatever has come to you?"

Mr. Parmalee got up and strode fiercely past her into the house.

"Pack up my clean socks and shirts,

mother," he said. "I'm going back to England by the first steamer."

Late next evening Mr. Parmalee reached New York. Early the following morning he strode up to the brown-stone mansion of Mr. Denover, and sharply rang the bell.

"Is Lady—I mean is Mr. Denover's niece at home?"

The servant stared, but ushered him in to the drawing-room.

"Who shall I say?"

Mr. Parmalee handed her his card.

"Give her that. Tell her it's a matter of life and death."

The servant stared harder than ever, but took the card and vanished. Ten minutes after, and Harriet, pale and terrified, hurried in.

"Mr. Parmalee, has anything—have you heard—oh, *what* is it?"

"It is this, Lady Kingsland. Your husband has been arrested and tried for your murder!"

She clasped her hands together and sank into a seat.

"Oh, Heaven!" she exclaimed, "he is condemned to death!"

"He is," said Mr. Parmalee; "but we'll stop 'em. Now, don't you go and excite yourself, my lady, because you'll need all your strength and presence of mind in this 'ere emergency. There's a steamer for Liverpool to-morrow. I secured our passage before I ever came here."

She pressed her hands convulsively over her throbbing heart.

"May Heaven grant we be in time! Oh, my love, my darling, my husband—I never thought of this! Let me save you, and I am ready to die!"

"Only hear her!" cried the electrified artist, who didn't understand this feminine sort of ethics. "Talking like that about the man she *thinks* stabbed her! I do believe she loves him yet."

She lifted her face and looked at him.

"With my whole heart! I would die this instant to save him! I love him as dearly as when I stood beside him at the altar, a bride. And he—ah, how dearly he loved me once! It is something even to remember that."

"Well, I'll be darned!" burst out Mr. Parmalee. "If this don't beat all creation! You wimmin are the most cur'ous critters that ever were invented. Now, then, what would you give to know it was *not* Sir Everard who stabbed you that night?"

She looked at him with wild, wide eyes.

"Yes," added Parmalee, "it was not your husband who stabbed you on the stone terrace that dismal night. It was Sybilla Silver!"

"*What!*"

"Yes, ma'am—sounds incredible, but it's a fact. She rigged out in a suit of Sir Everard's clothes, mimicked his voice, and did the deed. I saw her face, when she pitched you over the rail, as plain as I see yourn this minute, and I'm ready to swear to it through all the courts in Christendom. She hated you like pisen, and the baronet too, and she thinks she's put an end to you both; but if we don't give her an eye-opener pretty soon, my name ain't George Washington Parmalee."

She sank on her knees and held up her clasped hands.

"Thank Heaven—thank Heaven!"

Next day they sailed for England, and, after a quick passage, arrived in Liverpool. Mr. Parmalee and his companion posted full speed to Worrel.

"We'll go to Mr. Bryson's first," said Parmalee—Bryson being Sir Everard's lawyer. "We're in the very nick of time. To-morrow morning at day dawn is fixed for"—

"Oh, hush!"—in a voice of agony. "Not that fearful word! Oh, Mr. Parmalee, if we should be too late after all!"

"We can't," said the artist. "They ain't a-goin' to hang him for the murder of a woman they see alive. We'll stop 'em, if the rope is round his neck. You keep a good heart—you're all right at last."

They reached the house of Mr. Bryson. He sat over his eight-o'clock cup of tea, with a very gloomy face. The tragedy to take place in the grey and dismal dawn to-morrow had caused an awful shadow over the whole place.

A servant entered with a card, "G. W. Parmalee." The lawyer rose with a cry.

"Good Heaven above! It can't be! It's too good to be true! He never would rush into the lion's den in this way."

Mr. Bryson rushed for the drawing-room, flung wide the door, and confronted Mr. Parmalee. The sight struck him speechless.

"Good evening, squire!" said the American.

"You here," gasped the lawyer—"the man for whom we have been scouring the kingdom!"

"You'd oughter scoured the Atlantic," replied the artist, with infinite calm. "I've been home to see our folks. I suppose you wanted me to throw a little light on that 'ere horrid murder? Ah, dreadful thing that was! Found the body yet?"

"I suspect *you* know more of that murder than any other man alive," said the lawyer.

"Do tell! Well, now, I ain't a-goin' to deny it. I *do* know all about it, squire."

"In Heaven's name, man, speak out! *Who* did the deed?"

"*Sybilla Silver!*"

The lawyer clasped his hands, with a wild gesture.

"I knew it—I thought it—I said it! The she-devil! Poor, poor Lady Kingsland!"

"Ma'am," said the American, turning blandly to his veiled companion, "perhaps it will relieve Mr. Bryson's gushing bosom to behold your face. Jest lift that 'ere veil.'"

The veiled female arose, flung back her veil, and confronted the lawyer. With an awful cry, Mr. Bryson staggered back against the wall.

"All-merciful Heaven—the dead alive! *Lady Kingsland!*"

CHAPTER XXXV.

HIGHLY SENSATIONAL.

The night preceding the day fixed for the execution of Sir Everard, Sybilla Silver went to the sick room of his mother. It was almost eleven when she reached the Court, but they watched the night through in that house of mourning.

Leaving the cab before the front entrance, Sybilla stole round, in the placid May moonlight, to that side door she had used on the memorable night of the tenth of March. She had a latch-key to fit it, and it was never bolted, as she knew. She admitted herself without difficulty, and proceeded at once to Lady Kingsland's sick-room, where she found that lady alone.

"Is it you, Mildred?" a weak voice asked.

"It is not Mildred, my lady. It is I."

"Sybilla Silver!"

No words can describe the look of agony, of terror, of repulsion, that crossed my lady's face. She held up both hands with a gesture of loathing and horror.

"Keep off," she cried. "You murderess!"

Involuntarily the fiendish woman quailed at that word. But only for an instant.

"Yes," she cried, her black eyes flaming up, "that is the word—murderess!—for I murdered your daughter-in-law. You never liked her, you know, Lady Kingsland. Surely, then, when I stabbed her and threw her into the sea, I did you a good turn. Be still, and listen to me. I have a long story to tell you, beginning with the astrologer's prediction."

These two last words, as Sybilla well knew, riveted the attention of the sick woman at once.

With fiendish composure, Sybilla repeated the story again she had told Sir Everard, whilst Lady Kingsland lay paralyzed and listened.

The atrocious revelation ended, she looked

at her prostrate foe with a diabolical smile. Then she turned to leave the room.

At that same instant the door slid back, and a figure, all in white, with long, dishevelled hair and ghastly pale face, barred her path.

"Murderess!" spoke a deep and awful voice. "Murderess—murderess!"

With a shriek of wordless affright, Sybilla Silver leaped back, and stood cowering against the wall. For the dead had arisen and stood before her. The phantom slowly advanced.

"Mercy, mercy, mercy!" shrieked Sybilla. "Spare me! Oh, Heaven, what is this?"

"Confess!"

Horrible and terrible sounded that voice.

"I confess—I murdered you—I stabbed you! Sir Everard is innocent! Keep off! Mercy—mercy!"

With an unearthly scream, the horrified woman threw up both arms to keep off the awful vision, and fell forward in strong convulsions.

"Very well done," said Mr. Bryson, entering briskly. "I don't think we need any further proof of this woman's guilt. You have played ghost to some purpose, my dear Lady Kingsland. Who says now my melo-dramatic idea was not a good one? She would have denied every word, and tortures would not have wrung a confession out of her. Come in, gentlemen. We'll have no trouble carrying off our prize. I hope she hasn't done too much mischief already."

He paused, and stepped back with a blanched face. For Lady Kingsland lay writhing in the last agony.

With a wild cry, Mildred threw herself on her knees by her mother's side.

"Mamma—dear mamma—don't look like that! Harriet is not dead. She is here alive. It was that dreadful woman who tried to kill her. Everard is innocent, as we knew he was. He will be here with us in a day or two."

The dying woman was conscious. Her eyes turned and fixed on Harriet. The white disguise had been thrown off. She came over to the bedside, pale and beautiful.

"Mother," she said, sweetly, "it is indeed I. Dear mother, bless me once."

"May Heaven bless you and forgive me! Tell Everard!"

She never finished the sentence. The death rattle sounded, her head fell back, her eyes turned. With the name of the son she idolized upon her lips, Lady Kingsland was dead.

The three men—Mr. Bryson, Mr. Parmalee, and the chief constable of Worrel—stood looking at one another, stunned by the suddenness of the shock.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"AFTER STORM, THE SUNSHINE."

Earlier in the evening, when Harriet had told her story to Mr. Bryson, that gentleman had proceeded at once to the prison, to inform the prisoner and the officials that the murdered lady was alive.

Full of his good news, he hastened rapidly forward, and was admitted at once to the condemned cell.

Sir Everard lay upon the bed, pallid and exhausted, but thoroughly calm and self-possessed.

"My dear friend," said the lawyer, "can you bear a great shock—a shock of joy?"

The baronet sprang up in bed, electrified.

"Speak!" he gasped. "Oh, for Heaven's sake!"

"Your wife is alive!" Sybilla Silver stabbed her, and threw her over upon the shore. Mr. Parmalee picked her up—not dead, but badly wounded; took her on board a vessel; took her finally to America. Sybilla Silver deceived your poor wife as she deceived us all. Lady Kingsland thought it was you, Sir Everard. But she is alive and well, and in Worrel at this moment. Sir Everard, my dear friend, bear this like a man! You have endured the highest earthly misfortune like a hero; do not sink now under your new-found joy. God is good, you see, to those who trust in Him. Our first business is to cage our bird before she flies. Can you aid us in any way, Sir Everard? Where are we most likely to find her?"

"At the Court," the baronet answered. "She left here to go there—to kill my mother with her horrible news, if she could."

He was scarcely able to reply. His heart was full to bursting. His wife alive—in Worrel! Oh, it was too good to be true!

"We leave you now," Mr. Bryson said, rising. "I am off to secure my prisoner; and really I never did secure a prisoner before with half so much delight."

It was on his way back to his own house that Mr. Bryson lit on his ghostly plan for frightening Sybilla. How well it succeeded we know.

Sybilla was arrested, but was still insensible when she was handed over to the proper authorities. Harriet drove at once to the prison with Mr. Bryson.

Presently they led her to the door of the condemned cell. The gaoler admitted her and closed it again. Beside the bed, in the dim lamplight, Sir Everard knelt—very, very worn—very, very pale. She gave a sob at the sight.

Her arms were around his neck, her tears, her kisses raining on his face.

"Oh, my darling—my darling! My life, my love, my husband!"

"Harriet!"

With a great cry he arose, and held her to his heart—held her as though never on this earth to let her go again.

"My wife—my wife!"

And then, weak with long illness and repeated shocks—this last, greatest shock of all—he sat down, faint unto death.

"Oh, my love, my wife—to think that I should hold you once more in my arms, look once more into your living face! My wife—my wife! How cruel, how merciless I have been to you! May Heaven forgive me, I will forgive myself never!"

Her white hand covered his lips—her own sealed them with passionate kisses.

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One month later and Sir Everard Kingsland, his wife, and sister quitted England for the Continent, not to make the grand tour and return, but to reside for a year or two. England was too full of painful memories. Under the sunlit skies of beautiful Italy they were going to forget.

Sybilla Silver was dead. All her plans had failed—her oath of vengeance was broken. Sir Everard and his bride were triumphant. She had failed, miserably failed. She thought of it and she went mad—stark, staring mad. Her piercing shrieks rang through the stony prison all day and all night long, freezing the blood of the listeners, until one night, in a paroxysm

of frenzy, she dashed her head against the wall. They found her, in the morning, stone dead.

* * * * *

Out in the hazy June sunshine the steamer glided, leaving the chalky cliffs of Old England behind. With his handsome wife on his arm, the fair-haired young baronet stood looking his last for some time at his native land, his face infinitely happy.

"For years," he said, with a smile—"for life, perhaps, Harriet. I feel as if I never wished to return."

"But we shall," she said. "England is home. A few happy years in fair foreign lands, and then, Everard, back to the old land. But first, I confess, I should like again to see America, and Uncle Denover, and"—with a little laugh—"George Washington Parmalee."

For Mr. Parmalee had gone back to Dobbsville, a rich and happy man, at peace with all the world, Sir Everard Kingsland included.

"You're a brick, baronet," his parting speech had been, as he wrung that young man's hand—"you are, I swear! And your wife's another! Long may you live!"

Sir Everard laughed aloud now at the recollection.

"Money can never repay our obligation to that worthy artist. May his shadow never be less! We shall go over to Dobbsville and see him, and have our pictures taken next year. Look, Harrie, how the chalky cliffs are melting into the blue above! One parting peep at England, and so, a long good-bye to the old land," he said, taking off his hat, and standing, radiant and happy, with the June sunlight on his handsome head.



DRSP

